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AND SO JESS MORSE STEPPED FORWARD, BASHFULLY, AND FACED THE AUDIENCE.

Girls of Central High on the Stage. *(Frontispiece)*—*Page* 205

The Girls of Central High on the Stage

OR

The Play That Took The Prize

BY

GERTRUDE W. MORRISON

AUTHOR OF THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH,
THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH ON LAKE LUNA,
ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH ON THE STAGE

CHAPTER I

WHAT THE M. O. R.'S NEEDED

The M. O. R. house was alight from cellar to garret. It was the first big reception of the winter and followed closely the end of the first basketball trophy series and the football game between the Central High team and that of West High.

The M. O. R. was the only girls' secret society countenanced by Franklin Sharp, the principal of Central High. Until you belonged to it you never knew what the three initials stood for; after you were lucky enough to belong, the name of the society became such a deep and dark mystery that you never dared whisper it, even to your very closest "spoon."

Therefore, in all probability, we shall never learn just what "M. O. R." stands for.

Among the boys of Central High, their sisters and the other girls belonging to the secret society were spoken of as "Mothers of the Republic." But the boys were only jealous. They

were entirely shut out of the doings of the M. O. R.'s, which long antedated the Girls' Branch Athletic League; the boys never were allowed within the sacred precincts of the "House" save on the occasion of the special reception at Easter.

The house was a narrow slice of brownstone front in the middle of a block of similar dwellings, within sight of the schoolhouse, and in the Hill section of Centerport. The Hill was supposed to be very exclusive, and rents were high. And the rental of the thirteen-foot slice of brownstone had become a serious problem to the Board of Governors of the M. O. R.

Some M. O. R.'s had gone to college, many of them had married, some had moved many, many miles away from Centerport. But most of them remembered tenderly the first school society of which they had been members. The alumnae were loyal to M. O. R.

And some of the alumnae were on the present Board of Governors, and were—on this reception night—discussing seriously with the more active members of the board the financial state of the society. The owner of the house had notified them of a raise in rent for the coming year to an absolutely impossible figure. The M. O. R.'s must look for new quarters.

"If we could only interest the pupils of Central High, as a whole, members and those who are not in the M. O. R.," sighed Mrs. Mabel Kerrick.

The presence of this widowed lady, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Centerport, and an alumna of the school, upon the Board of Governors of the M. O. R. needs an explanation that must be deferred.

"I don't see how we can interest the boys—they only make fun," said a very bright looking girl sitting upon the other side of the room, and beside another very bright looking girl who looked so much like her (they were dressed just alike) that unless one had seen her lips move one could never have told whether Dora Lockwood, or Dorothy Lockwood, had spoken.

"And how are you going to interest the girls who haven't been asked to join the M. O. R.—and are not likely to be asked?" demanded the other twin. "The very exclusiveness of the society makes it impossible for us to call upon the school in general for help."

"Just raise the fees and we can pay the higher rent," remarked another girl, briskly.

"And then, at the end of next year, Mr. Chumley will raise it again. He owns more rentable property than any other man on the

Hill, and just as soon as he is sure his tenant is settled he begins to put up the rent on him," observed a fourth girl.

"That is just it," Mrs. Kerrick responded, slowly. "The society should not pay rent. We should own our own house. We should build. We should raise a goodly sum of money this winter toward the building fund. But we must find some method of interesting everybody in our need.

"A membership in the M. O. R. has always been a reward of merit. Freshmen cannot, of course, be 'touched' for the M. O. R., and few sophomores attain that enviable eminence. But by the time a girl has reached her senior year at Central High it is her own fault if she is not a member.

"Therefore, the girls of the younger classes should be interested in the stability of the society, irrespective of whether they are members yet, or not. And naturally, if the girls are interested, they can interest their brothers and their parents."

"Suppose, Mrs. Kerrick, a girl hasn't any brothers?" demurely asked a quiet girl in the corner.

"Very well, then, Nellie Agnew!" said the lady, laughing. "You go and interest some

other girl's brother. But we haven't heard from little Mother Wit," added Mrs. Kerrick, turning suddenly to a pretty, plump girl, all in brown and with shining hair and eyes, who sat by herself at the far end of the room. "Haven't you a thing to say, Laura Belding?"

"Won't it be a little difficult," asked the girl addressed, diffidently, "to invent anything that will interest everybody in the building fund of the M. O. R.?"

"That's what we're all saying, Laura," said one of the other members of the Board. "Now you invent something!"

"You give me a hard task," laughed the brown girl. "Of course, all members—both active and graduate—will be interested for their membership's sake. The problem is, then, in addition, to interest, first, the girls who *may* be members, and, second, the boys and general public who can never be members of the M. O. R."

"Logically put, Laura," urged Mrs. Kerrick. "Then what?"

"Why wouldn't a play fill the bill?" asked Laura. "Offer a prize for an original play written by a girl of Central High, irrespective of class or whether she is an M. O. R. or not—that will interest the girls in general. Have the play presented by boys and girls of the school—

that will hold the boys. And the parents and general public can help by paying to see the performance."

The younger members of the committee looked at one another doubtfully; but Mrs. Kerrick clapped her hands enthusiastically.

"A play! The very thing! And Mr. Sharp will approve that, no doubt. We will appoint him chief of the committee to decide upon the play. And we will offer a prize big enough to make it worth while for every girl to try her best to produce a good one."

"But that prize must be deducted from the profits of the performance," objected the practical Nellie Agnew.

"No," replied Mrs. Kerrick, promptly. "That will be my gift. *I* will offer the prize—two hundred dollars—for the best play submitted before New Year's. How is that? Do you think it will 'take'? Come, Laura, does your inventive genius approve of that suggestion?"

"I think it is very lovely of you, Mrs. Kerrick," cried Mother Wit. "Oh, my! Two hundred dollars! It is magnificent. Let us find Mr. Sharp at once and see if he approves. He is still in the house, I know," and at her suggestion somebody was sent to hunt for the principal of Central High, who was one of the guests of

honor of the M. O. R. on this particular evening.

Centerport was a lively, wealthy inland city situated on the shore of Lake Luna, and boasting three high schools within its precincts. The new building of Central High was much finer and larger than the East and West Highs, and there was considerable rivalry between the girls of the three schools, not only in athletic matters, but in all other affairs. Out of school hours, basketball and other athletics had pretty well filled the minds of the girls of Central High; and Laura Belding and her particular chums had been as active in these inter-school athletics as any.

In fact, it was Mother Wit, as her friends and schoolmates called Laura, who interested Colonel Richard Swayne, Mrs. Kerrick's father, in the matter of girls' athletics and so made possible for the girls of Central High the finest athletic field and gymnasium in the State.

Incidentally she had interested Mrs. Kerrick in the girls of Central High, too, and reminded the widowed lady that she was an alumna and a member of the M. O. R. In her renewed interest in the affairs of the secret society and in the Girls' Branch Athletic League, Mrs. Kerrick had become very different from the almost helpless invalid first introduced to the reader in the

first volume of this series, entitled "The Girls of Central High; Or, Rivals for All Honors."

In that first volume was related the establishment of athletics for girls at Central High, and introduced Laura Belding and her especial chums in their school trials and triumphs. In the second volume, "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna; Or, The Crew That Won," were narrated the summer aquatic sports of the same group of girls and their boy friends.

"The Girls of Central High at Basketball; Or, The Great Gymnasium Mystery," the third volume of the series, told of the girls when they had become juniors and related the struggle of the rival basketball teams of the three Centerport highs, and the high schools of Keyport and Lumberport, at either end of Lake Luna, for the trophy cup. That series of games had just been finished and Central High had won the trophy, when Laura and her friends, as members of the M. O. R., are again introduced to the reader's notice at the opening of this chapter.

CHAPTER II

WHAT JOSEPHINE MORSE NEEDED

In spite of the bright lights illuminating the windows of the M. O. R. house—and many other larger and finer houses at that end of Whiffle Street—outside it was dark and dreary enough. Epecially was this so at the "poverty-stricken end," as Josephine Morse called her section of the street. Jess and her widowed mother lived on the fringe of the wealthy Hill district, where Whiffle Street develops an elbow, suddenly becomes narrow, and debouches upon Market Street.

It was raining, too. Not an honest, splashing downpour, but a drizzling, half-hearted rain that drifted about the streets as though ashamed of itself, leaving a deposit of slime on all the crosswalks, and making the corner street-lamps weep great tears. The gas-lamps, too, seemed in a fog and struggled feebly against the blackness of the evening.

Under a huge umbrella which snuffed her al-

most like a candle, Jess had made her way into Market Street and to Mr. Closewick's grocery store near the corner. She carried a basket on her arm and she had given the clerk rather a long list of necessary things, although she had studied to make the quantities as modest as possible. The clerk had put them all up now and packed them into the basket and stood expectantly with the list checked off in his hand.

"Two dollars and seven cents, Miss Jess," he said.

"I'll have to ask you to add that to our bill," said the girl, flushing. "Mother is short of money just now."

"Wait a moment, Miss Jess; I'll speak to Mr. Closewick," said the clerk, seemingly as much embarrassed as the girl herself, and he stepped hastily toward the glass-enclosed office at the rear of the store.

But the pursy old man with the double chin and spectacles on his forehead, the height of which the wisp of reddish-gray hair could not hide, had observed it all. He got down ponderously from his stool and squeaked out behind the long counter in his shiny boots.

"I sent my bill over to your mother this morning, Miss Jess," he said. "It is more than twenty dollars without this list of goods to-

night," and he shook the modest little paper in his hand, having taken it from the clerk.

"Mother is short of money just now," repeated Jess.

"So'm I. You tell her so. I can't let you increase your indebtedness," and his pudgy hand lifted the basket and put it on the shelf behind him.

"You pay me something on account, or pay for these goods you've ordered this evening. I'm needing money, too."

"Mr. Closewick! I hope you won't do that," gasped Jess, paling under his stern glance. "We will pay you—we always have. Mother sometimes has to wait for her money—a long time. We spend many a twenty-dollar bill in your store during the year——"

"That ain't neither here nor there," said the grocer, ponderously. "It's a rule I have. Never let a bill run more than twenty dollars. 'Specially where there's no man in the family. Hard to collect from a woman. Makes me bad friends if I press 'em. I can afford to risk losing twenty dollars; but no more!"

"How can you!" cried Jess, under her breath, for there was somebody else entering the store. "We have bought of you for years——"

"And if I hadn't stuck to the few business

rules I have, I wouldn't have been here selling you goods for years," returned Mr. Closewick, grimly. "The sheriff would have sold me out. I'm sorry for your mother, and I don't want to lose her trade. But business is business."

"And you cannot favor us for this single occasion?" choked Jess.

"It would lead to others; I can't break a rule," said the grocer, stubbornly. "Come now, Miss Jess! You go home and tell your mother how it is. I'll keep this basket right here for you, and you come back with the two-seven, and it will be all right."

"That would be useless," said Jess, clinging to the counter for support, and feeling for the moment as though she should sink. "We haven't any money—at present. If we had I should not have asked you for any extension of credit. Please give me back my basket."

"So?" returned the grocer, frowning. "Very well," and he deliberately unpacked the parcels and handed her the basket—making a show of so doing in the presence of the newly arrived customer. "And what can I do for *you,* this evening, Mrs. Brown?" he asked, blandly, speaking to the new arrival while he handed Jess her basket without a word.

"And that woman will tell about it all over

town!" thought the girl, as she hurried into the street. "Oh, dear, dear! whatever shall I do?"

For the cupboard at the Morse cottage was very bare indeed. Mrs. Mary Morse had some little standing as a contributor to the more popular magazines; but the returns from her pen-work being her entire means of income, there were sometimes weary waitings for checks. Jess had been used to these unpleasant occasions ever since she was a very little girl. Her mother was of a nervous temperament and easily disturbed; and as Jess had grown she had tried to shield her mother, at these times of famine, from its most unpleasant features.

As witness her passage-at-arms with the grocer, Mr. Closewick. No money in the house, an empty pantry, their credit cut off at the store where they had always traded, and no credit established at any other grocer's shop! The situation looked desperate, indeed, to Jess Morse.

Jess shrank from trying the butcher's and the dairy store, too. At each shop an unpaid bill would stare her in the face and to-night she felt as though each proprietor would demand a "payment on account." It was a black night indeed. November was going out in its very mournfullest and dismallest manner.

And for Jess Morse there was an added bur-

den of disappointment and trouble. She was not able to attend the M. O. R. reception, although she was a member. Laura Belding, her very dearest friend, would be there and would wonder why she, Jess, did not appear. And after the reception Chet Belding, Laura's brother, would be waiting to take Jess home—she hadn't had the heart to tell Chet that she would not need his escort from the reception.

But, as Jess had told her mother, that blue party dress had become impossible. Let alone its being months behind the fashion, it was frayed around the bottom and the front breadth was sorely stained. And she hadn't another gown fit to put on in the evening. She did so long for something to wear at a party in which her friends would not know her two blocks away. So she had "cut" the reception at the M. O. R. house.

All this was a heavy load on Jess Morse's mind as she approached, with hesitating steps, the butter and egg shop kept by Mr. Vandergriff.

"Certainly," thought the troubled girl, "I either need a whole lot of courage, or a lot of money—either would come in very handy tonight."

Just then Jess was aroused from her brown

study by hearing somebody calling breathlessly after her.

"Hi! Hi! Aren't you going to look around? Jess Morse!"

A girl smaller than herself, and dressed from neck to heels in a glistening raincoat, ran under Jess's umbrella and seized her arm. She was a laughing, curly-haired girl with dancing black eyes and an altogether roguish look.

"Jess Morse! don't you ever look back on the street—no matter what happens?" she demanded.

"For what was Lot's wife turned to salt, Bobby?" returned Jess, solemnly.

"For good! Now you know, don't you?' laughed Clara Hargrew, whose youthful friends knew her as "Bobby."

"Why aren't you at the 'big doin's' tonight," demanded the harum-scarum Bobby. "You're a Mother of the Republic; what means this delinquency?"

"Just supposing I had something else to do?" returned Jess, trying to speak lightly. "I'm on an errand now."

She wished to shake Bobby off. She dared not take her into Mr. Vandergriff's store. Suppose the butter and egg man should treat her as the grocer had?

"Say! you ought to be up there," cried the unconscious Bobby. "I just came past the house and it was all lit up like—like a hotel. And Mr. Sharp was just coming out with Mrs. Kerrick. Mrs. Kerrick is going to do something big for us girls of Central High."

"What do you mean?" asked Jess, only half interested in Bobby's gossip.

"Going to give us a chance to win a prize, or something," pursued Bobby.

"Oh! how do you know?" Jess showed more interest now.

"Why, I heard Mr. Sharp say, as he was helping Mrs. Kerrick into Colonel Swayne's auto:

"'The girls of Central High should be delighted, Mrs. Kerrick—and very grateful to you, indeed. Two hundred dollars! And a chance for any smart girl to win it!'—just like that. Now, Jess, you and I are both smart girls, aren't we?" demanded Bobby, roguishly.

"We think we are, at any rate," returned Jess, more eagerly. "Two hundred dollars! Oh! wouldn't that be fine!"

"It would buy a lot of candy and ice-cream sodas," chuckled Bobby.

But to herself Jess Morse thought: "And it would mean the difference, for mother and me, between penury and independence! Oh, dear

me! is it something that *I* can do to earn two hundred dollars?"

And she listened to Bobby's surmises about the mysterious prize without taking in half what the younger girl was saying. Two hundred dollars! And she and her mother did not have a cent. She looked up and saw the lights of the butter and egg store just ahead, and sighed.

CHAPTER III

WHAT MR. CHUMLEY NEEDED

"WELL, old Molly-grubs, I've got to leave you here," said Bobby Hargrew, pinching the arm of Jess. "You're certainly down in the mouth to-night. I never saw you so before. I'd like to know what the matter is with you," complained Bobby, and ran off in the rain.

Jess was heartily glad to get rid of her; and it was seldom that she ever felt that way about Bobby. Bobby was the double distilled essence of cheerfulness.

But Jess felt as though nothing could cheer her to-night but the finding of a big, fat pocketbook on the street—one that "didn't belong to nobody!" There wasn't such an object in sight, however, along the glistening walk—the walk that glistened in the lamplight from Mr. Vandergriff's store.

She positively *had* to try her luck at the butter and egg shop. The man could do no more than refuse her, that was sure.

But when Jess had lowered her umbrella and backed into the shop, she found several customers waiting at the counter. Mr. Vandergriff and his son, whom the boys called "Griff" and who played fullback on the Central High football team, were waiting upon these customers. Soon Griff was through with the man he was waiting on and came to Jess.

"What's yours to-night, Miss Morse?" he asked, and was so cheerful about it that the girl's heart rose. They didn't owe Mr. Vandergriff such a large bill, anyway. The proprietor was waiting upon the lady who stood beside Jess as she gave her order to Griff. The lady was a very dressy person and she laid her silver-mesh purse on the counter between herself and Jess. The latter saw the glint of gold coins between the meshes of the purse and her heart throbbed. She moved quietly away from the lady. Wasn't it wicked—seemingly—that one should have so much money, while another needed the very necessities of life?

"Thank you, Griff," Jess heard herself saying to the younger Vandergriff, as he packed her modest order in the basket. "I shall have to ask you to charge that."

"All right, Miss Morse. Nothing more to-night?"

"No," said Jess, and went back and unhooked her umbrella from the edge of the counter where she had hung it, and started for the door. A bright-eyed man in a long blue raincoat who had been waited upon by Griff already was just then going out, and he held open the door for her. As she stepped out the girl saw that the rain was no longer falling—merely a mist clung about the street lamps. She did not raise her umbrella, but hurried toward home.

There was enough in her basket for breakfast, at least. She would wait until to-morrow—which was Saturday—before she went to the butcher's. Perhaps something would happen. Perhaps in the morning mail there would be a check for her mother instead of a returned manuscript.

And all the time, while her feet flew homeward, she thought of the prize of two hundred dollars that Mrs. Mabel Kerrick was to offer for the girls of Central High to work for. What was the task? Could it be something that *she* excelled in?

Jess was almost tempted to wait up until the reception was over and then run to the Belding house and see her chum before Laura went to bed. Laura might know all about it.

Two hundred dollars!

Jess saw the words before her in dancing, rain-drop letters. They seemed to beckon her on, and in a few minutes she was at the cottage, just at the "elbow" of Whiffle Street, and came breathlessly into the kitchen.

The room was empty, and the fire in the stove was but a spark. Jess tiptoed to the sitting-room door and peered in. Her mother, wearing an ink-stained jacket, was busy at her desk, the pen scratching on the big sheets of pad paper. The typewriter was open, too, and the girl could see that the title and opening paragraphs of a new story had already been written on the machine.

"Genius burns again!" sighed Jess, and went back to remove her damp hat and jacket, and replenish the fire. Mother would want some tea by and by, if she worked late into the evening, and Jess drew the kettle forward.

She stood her umbrella behind the entry door, and removed her overshoes and put them under the range to dry. She had scarcely done so when a stumbling foot sounded on the porch. She opened the door before the visitor could knock, so that Mrs. Morse would not be disturbed.

"Why, Mr. Chumley!" she exclaimed, recognizing the withered little man who stood there.

"Oh! you're home, are ye?" squeaked the

landlord. "I was here a little while ago and nobody answered my knock, though I could hear that typewriter going *rat, tat, tat* all the time."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chumley," said Jess, hastily. "But you know how mother is when she's busy. She hears nothing."

"Humph!"

"Won't you come in?" hesitated Jess, still holding the door. The rent was not due for a day or two, and he usually gave them a few days' grace if they did not happen to have it right in the nick of time.

"I guess I will," squeaked the landlord.

He was a little whiffet of a man—"looked like a figure on a New Year's cake," Bobby Hargrew said. His mouth was a mere slit in his gray, wrinkled face, and his eyes were so close together that the sharp bridge of his nose scarcely parted them.

Some landlords hire agents to attend to their property and to the collection of rents. Not so Mr. Chumley. He did not mind the trouble of collecting, and he could fight off repairs longer than any landlord in town. And the one-half of one per cent. collection fee was an item.

"Think I've come ahead of time, eh?" he cackled, rubbing his blue hands—as blue as a turkey's foot, Jess thought—over the renewed

fire. "It ain't many days before rent's due again. If ye have it handy ye can pay me now, Miss Josephine."

"It isn't handy, Mr. Chumley. We are shorter than usual just now," said Jess, hating the phrase that comes so often to the lips of poverty.

"Well! well! Can't expect money before it's due, I s'pose," said the old man, licking his thin lips. "And I'm afraid ye find it pretty hard to meet your bills at 'tis?" he added, his head on one side like a gray old stork.

Jess flushed and then paled. What had *he* heard? Had that Mrs. Brown, in the grocer's shop, told him already that Mr. Closewick had refused to let her increase the bill? The girl looked at him without speaking, schooling her features to betray nothing of the fear that gripped her heart.

"Hey?" squeaked Mr. Chumley. "Don't ye hear well?"

"I hear you, sir," said Jess, glancing quickly to make sure that she had closed the door tightly between the kitchen and the room in which her mother was at work.

"Well, I'm willin' to help folks out—always," said Mr. Chumley, his withered cheek flushing. "If you're finding the rent of this

house too much fer ye, why, there's cheaper tenements in town. I own some of 'em myself. Taxes is increased this year and I gotter go up on all rentals——"

"But, Mr. Chumley! we've lived in this cottage of yours ever since I can remember. We've paid you a lot of rent. You surely are not going to increase it now?"

"I am, after December, Miss Josephine," declared Mr. Chumley. "I gotter do it. Beginnin' with January first your mother will have to pay three dollars more each month. You kin tell her that. I'm giving you a month's warning."

"Oh, Mr. Chumley! Surely you won't put us out——"

"I ain't sayin' nothing about putting you out, though your mother ain't as sure pay as some others. She's slow. And she's a woman alone. Hard to git your money out of a widder woman. No. She can stay if she pays the three dollars increase. Otherwise, I got the cottage as good as rented right now to another party."

He moved toward the door, without lifting his eyes again to Jess's face.

"You'll tell her that," he said. "I'd like to do business with her instead of with a half-grown gal. Don't suppose you *could* let me have the next month's rent to-night, eh?"

"It isn't due yet, Mr. Chumley," Jess said, undecided whether to "get mad" or to cry!

"Well—— Hello! who's these?"

There was another clatter of footsteps upon the porch as old Mr. Chumley opened the outer door. Jess looked past him and saw a female and a male figure crowding into the entry. For a moment she recognized neither.

"That's the girl!" exclaimed the woman, and her voice was sharp and excited.

"Hello!" muttered Mr. Chumley, and stood aside. "Here's young Vandergriff."

Jess looked on, speechless with amazement. She now recognized Griff, and the woman with him was the fashionably attired lady who had stood beside Jess at the counter in the butter and egg store.

"Miss Jess! Miss Jess!" exclaimed Griff, quickly. "Did you open your umbrella on the way home?"

"I—I——"

"Stupid!" exclaimed the woman.

"Why, Griff, I didn't open it."

"And you haven't opened it yet?"

"Why—no," admitted the puzzled Jess.

"Where is it?" cried the young man. "Now, you wait, Mrs. Prentice. I know it will be all right."

"That's all very fine, young man. But it isn't your purse that is lost," exclaimed the woman, tartly.

At last Jess understood. She started forward and her face flamed.

"Oh!" she cried. "Did you lose that silver mesh purse?"

"You see! She remembers it well enough," said the woman.

"I could scarcely forget it. You laid it on the counter between us. And it was heavy with money," said Jess.

"Now, wait!" cried Griff, interposing, while old Chumley listened eagerly, his little eyes snapping. "Did you set your umbrella aside without opening it, Miss Morse?"

"Yes, I did," repeated Jess.

"And you had it hanging by the hooked handle on the edge of the counter right beside this lady, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"I saw it. It's just like a story book!" laughed Griff. "Get the umbrella, Miss Morse. I knew it would be all right——"

"I am not convinced that it is 'all right,' as you say, young man," spoke Mrs. Prentice, eyeing Jess's flushed face, suspiciously.

"Get it from behind the door there, Griff,"

said the girl, hurriedly. She, too, had heard of such an incident as this. Perhaps the purse had been knocked from the counter into her open umbrella. But suppose it was *not* there?

CHAPTER IV

WHAT MRS. PRENTICE NEEDED

"HERE it is! here's the umbrella!" squeaked the officious Mr. Chumley, coming out from behind the entry door, where he had been listening.

All three of them—Jess, Griff, and the excited loser of the purse—reached for the umbrella; but Griff was the first.

"Hold on!" said he to the landlord. "Let me have that, sir. The purse was lost in our store. We're just as much interested in the matter as anybody."

"I fail to see that, young man," said Mrs. Prentice, tartly.

She was not naturally of a mean disposition; but she was excited, and the explanation Griff had given her of the loss of the purse had seemed to her unimaginative mind "far-fetched," to say the least.

The boy half opened the umbrella and turned it over. Crash to the floor fell the purse, and it snapped open as it landed. Out upon the lino-

leum rolled the glistening coins—several of them gold pieces—that Jess had noted so greedily in the egg store.

"What did I tell you?" cried Griff, looking at Mrs. Prentice.

That lady only exclaimed "Oh!" very loudly and looked aghast at the rolling coins. Jess half stooped to gather up the scattered money. Then she thought better of it and straightened up, looking straight into the face of the owner of the purse.

But old Mr. Chumley could not stand the lack of interest the others seemed to show in what—to him—was the phase of particular importance in the whole affair. There was real money rolling all over the Widow Morse's kitchen. He went down on his rheumatic old knees and scrambled for it. Mr. Chumley worshipped money, anyway, and this was a worshipper's rightful attitude.

"My, my, my!" he kept repeating. "How careless!"

But Mrs. Prentice's expression of countenance was swiftly changing. She flushed deeply—much more deeply than had Jess; then she paled. She picked up Mr. Chumley's phrase, although she allowed the old man to pick up the money.

"I certainly *have* been careless," she said. "I

—I must have nudged that purse off the counter with my elbow. I—I—— My dear girl! will you forgive me?"

She stepped forward and opened her arms to Jess. She was not only a well dressed lady, but she was a handsome one, and her smile, when she chose to allow it to appear, was winning. The anger and indignation Jess had felt began to melt before this apology and the lady's frank manner.

"I—I suppose it was a natural mistake," stammered Jess.

"Not if she'd known you, Miss Jess," Griff said, quite sharply for him. "Nobody who knew you or your mother would have accused you of taking a penny's worth that didn't rightfully belong to you."

Jess, whose heart was still sore from the blow she had received at Mr. Closewick's grocery, thought this was very kind of Griff. And they owed his father, too! If there were tears standing in her eyes they were tears of gratitude.

"You see, my dear," said the lady, her voice very pleasant indeed now, "I did not know you as well as young Mr. Vandergriff seems to."

"We—we go to school together," explained Jess, weakly, and found herself drawn into the arms of the lady.

Mr. Chumley rose up with a grunt and a groan; he had the purse and all the coins.

"Very careless! very careless!" he repeated. "And here is nearly a hundred dollars, madam. Think of carelessly carrying a hundred dollars in a silly purse like that! It is astonishing——"

Mrs. Prentice had implanted a soft little kiss on Jess's forehead and shaken her a little playfully by both shoulders.

"Don't you bear malice, my dear," she whispered. Then she turned briefly to the old man.

"You're very kind, I'm sure," she said, taking the purse into which Mr. Chumley had crammed the money. "Thank you."

"Money comes too hard for folks to scatter it around," complained the landlord.

Mrs. Prentice seemed to be much amused. "I should be more careful, I suppose. I presume, now, I ought to count it to see if—if you gathered it all up, sir?" she added, her eyes dancing.

A little breath of red crept into the withered cheeks of the miserly old man. "Well, well!" he ejaculated. "One can't be too careful."

"I presume not," said the lady.

"And if the gal had known the money was there she might have been tempted, ye see."

Jess flushed again and Griff looked angry; but Mrs. Prentice said, coolly:

"Were *you* tempted, sir? Perhaps I had better count my money, after all?"

"Ahem! ahem!" coughed the old gentleman. "Perhaps you don't know who I am? There is a vast difference between me—my condition, I mean—and the gal and her mother."

"Ah! Do you think so?" asked Mrs. Prentice, and then turned her back upon him. "I should like to know you better, my dear—and your mother. I hope you will show me that I am really forgiven by allowing me to call some day——Oh! I couldn't face your mother now. I know just how I would feel myself if I had a daughter who had been accused as I accused you. I certainly need to take care—as our friend here says."

"I am sure mother would be pleased to meet you," stammered Jess.

"You know, I am Mrs. Prentice. My brother-in-law, Patrick Sarsfield Prentice, is editor and proprietor of the Centerport *Courier*."

Jess's interest was doubly aroused now. So *this* was the rich Mrs. Prentice, whom they said really backed Centerport's newest venture in the newspaper field?

"My mother has met Mr. Prentice—your brother-in-law," she said, diffidently. "You know, mother writes. She is Mary Morse."

"Ah, yes," said the lady, preparing to follow Griff out. "I am really glad to have known you —but I am sorry we began our acquaintance so unfortunately."

"That—that is all right, Mrs. Prentice," returned the girl.

Griff called back goodnight to her over his shoulder. And at the gate he parted from the lady whose carelessness had made all the trouble.

"That's just what I told you, Mrs. Prentice," he said. "They're all right folks, those Morses. Yes, Mrs. Prentice, I'll remember to send all those things you ordered over in the morning—first delivery," and he went off, whistling.

CHAPTER V

THERE IS A GENERAL NEED

Mrs Prentice would have turned away from the gate of the Morse cottage and gone her homeward way, too, had she not heard a cackling little "ahem!" behind her. There was the wizened Mr. Chumley right on her heels.

"Very fortunate escape—very fortunate escape, indeed," said the landlord.

"It was," agreed the repentant lady. "I might have gone farther and done much worse in my excitement."

"Oh, no," said he. "I mean it was fortunate for the girl — and her mother. Of course, they've got nothing, and had the money really been missing it would have looked bad."

Mrs. Prentice eyed him in a way that would have made a person with a thinner skin writhe a little. But Mr. Chumley's feelings were not easily hurt.

"You evidently know all about those people?" said the lady, bruskly.

"Oh, yes. They've been my tenants for some

years. But rents are going up in this neighborhood and—— Well, I can get a much more satisfactory tenant."

"You have been warning them out of the cottage?" asked Mrs. Prentice, quickly.

"Not just that," said the old man, rubbing his hands together as though he had an imaginary cake of soap between them and was busily washing the Morse affair from his palms. "You see, I've told them I shall be obliged to increase their rent at New Year's."

"What do they pay you now?"

Mr. Chumley told her frankly. He wasn't ashamed of what he took for the renting of that particular piece of property. In a business way, he was doing very well, and business was all that mattered with Mr. Chumley.

"But that's better than *I* can get for the same sort of a cottage in this very vicinity," exclaimed Mrs. Prentice.

"Ah! these agents!" groaned Mr. Chumley, shaking his head. "They never will do as well as they should for an owner. I found that out long ago. If I was a younger man, Mrs. Prentice, I would take hold of your property and get you twenty-five per cent. more out of it."

"Perhaps," commented the lady. "And you intend to raise the rent on these people?"

"I have done so. Three dollars. I can get it. Besides, a woman alone ain't good pay," said Chumley. "And they're likely to fall behind any time in the rent. Most uncertain income——"

"Is it true that Mrs. Morse writes for a living?"

"I don't know what sort of a livin' she makes. Foolish business. She'd better take in washing, or go out to day's work—that's what she'd better do," snarled the old man. "This messin' with pen, ink, an' a typewriter an' thinkin' she can buy pork an' pertaters on the proceeds——"

"Perhaps she doesn't care for pork and potatoes, my friend," laughed the lady, eyeing Mr. Chumley whimsically.

But a flush had crept into the old man's withered cheek again. He was on his hobby and he rode it hard.

"Poor folks ain't no business to have finicky idees, or tastes," he declared. "They gotter work. That's what they was put in the world for—to work. There's too many of 'em trying to keep their hands clean, an' livin' above their means. Mary Morse is a good, strong, hearty woman. She'd ought to do something useful with her hands instead of doing silly things with her mind."

"So she writes silly things?"

"Stories! Not a word of truth in 'em, I vum! I read one of 'em once," declared Mr. Chumley. "Widder Morse wants to ape these well-to-do folks that live 'tother end o' Whiffle Street. Keeps her gal in high school when she'd ought to be in a store or a factory, earnin' her keep. She's big enough."

"Do you think that's a good way to bring up girls—letting them go to work so early in life?"

"Why not?" asked the old man, in wonder. "They kin work cheap and it helps trade. Too much schoolin' is bad for gals. They don't need it, anyway. And all the fal-lals and di-does they l'arn 'em in high school now doesn't amount to a row of pins in practical life. No, ma'am!"

"But do these Morses have such a hard time getting along?" asked Mrs. Prentice, trying to bring the gossipy old gentleman back to the main subject.

"They don't meet their bills prompt," snapped the landlord. "Now! here I was in the house to-night. I suggested that the gal pay the rent for December; it'll be due in a day or two. And she didn't have it. They're often late with it. I have to come two or three times before I get it, some months. And I hear they owe the tradesmen a good deal."

"They are really in need of sympathy and help, then?"

"How's that?" demanded Mr. Chumley, with his cupped hand to his ear as though he could not believe his own hearing.

The lady repeated her remark.

"There you go! You're another of them folks that waste their substance. I could see that by your keerless handlin' of money," croaked Mr. Chumley. "The Widder Morse don't need help —she needs sense, I tell ye."

"And do you know what you need, Mr. Chumley?" asked the lady, suddenly, and with some asperity.

"Heh?"

"You need charity! We all need it. And we've gossiped enough about our neighbors, I declare! Good night, Mr. Chumley," she added, and turned off through the side street toward her own home, leaving the old man to wend his own way homeward, wagging his head and muttering discourteous comments upon "all fool women."

Mrs. Prentice was a widow herself. But she had no mawkish sentimentality. She had lived in the world too many years for that. She was not given to charities of any kind. But the thought of Jess Morse and her widowed mother

clung to her mind like a limpet to a rock—even after she had dismissed her maid that night and retired.

"Just think!" she muttered, with her head on the pillow. "If that purse had been really lost I might have made that young girl a lot of trouble—and her mother. And she is such a frank, courageous little thing!

"We *do* need more charity—the right kind. Somehow—yes—I *must* do something to help that girl."

CHAPTER VI

IT ALL COMES OUT

Before morning old Jack Frost snapped his fingers and the whole world was encased in ice. The sidewalks were a glare, the trees, and bushes, to their tiniest twig, were as brittle as icicles, and a thin white blanket had been laid upon the lawns along Whiffle Street.

It was the first really cold snap of winter. Chet Belding came clumping down to breakfast that Saturday morning.

"Skating shoes!" exclaimed his sister, Laura. "What for, Sir Knight?"

"I bet a feller can skate in the street—on the sidewalk—almost anywhere this morning," declared Chet, with enthusiasm.

"You don't mean to try it?" cried Laura.

"I'll eat my honorable grandmother's hat if I don't——"

"Chetwood!"

The horrified ejaculation came from behind the coffee percolator. Mrs. Belding had been

perusing her morning mail. Mr. Chetwood chuckled, but graduated it into a pronounced cough.

"Yes, ma'am!" said Chet, meekly.

"What *kind* of language is this that you bring to our table? Your grandmother certainly was honorable——"

"That's an imitation of the stilted expressions of the Japs and Chinks," interrupted Chetwood. "Thought you'd like it. It's formal, abounds in flowery expressions, and may not be hastened. Quotation from Old Dimple," he added, sotto voce.

"Please leave your grandmother out of it," said Mrs. Belding, severely. "And if you mean Professor Dimp, your teacher at Central High, do not call him 'Old Dimple' in my presence," which showed that Mother Belding's hearing was pretty acute.

"Anyhow," said Chet, "I'm going to try the ice after breakfast. Going to get Lance and we'll have some fun. Better get your skates, Laura."

"No. I'm going to the store with father—if we don't both tumble down and roll to the bottom of the hill at Market Street, like Jack and Jill," laughed his sister.

"Teams can't get over the asphalt this morn-

ing," said her brother. "We can coast clear to the elbow, I bet you."

He hurried through his breakfast and some time after Laura and her father started for the jewelry store, in which the girl had certain Saturday morning tasks to perform, the voices of Chet and his friends awoke the echoes of the street as they skated on the asphalt.

Whiffle Street was an easy slope toward the elbow, where Jess Morse and her mother lived. Although the keen wind blew pretty strongly right up the hill, when Laura and her father started for the store the boys were holding hands and in a line that swept the street from curb to curb, sailed gaily down the hill upon their skates.

"That's fun!" exclaimed Laura, her cheeks rosy with the wind, and her eyes sparkling.

"It's just like life," said her father. "It's easy going down hill; but see what a pull it is to get up again," for Chet and his comrades had then begun the homeward skate.

Lance Darby, a fair-haired, rosy-cheeked lad, who was Chet's particular chum, was ahead and he came, puffingly, to a stop just before Laura.

"This is great—if it wasn't for the 'getting back again.' Good-morning, Mr. Belding."

"Why don't you boys rig something to tow you up the hill?" asked Laura, laughing, and half hiding her face in her muff.

"Huh!" ejaculated her brother, coming up, too. "How'd we rig it, Sis?"

"Come on, Mother Wit!" laughed Lance. "You tell us."

"Why—I declare, Chet's got just the thing standing behind the door in his den," cried Laura. her eyes twinkling.

"What?" cried Chet. "You're fooling us. Laura. My snowshoes——"

"Not them," laughed Laura, preparing to go on with her father.

"I know!" shouted Lance, slapping his chum suddenly on the back. He was as familiar with Chet's room as was Chet himself.

"Out with it, then!" demanded Chet.

"That big kite of yours. Wind's directly up the hill. We'll get it and try the scheme. Oh, you Mother Wit!" shouted Lance, after Laura. "We're going after the kite."

And that suggestion of Laura's was the beginning of Chet and Lance Darby's "mile-a-minute ice-boat"—but more of that wonderful invention later.

Laura was halted again before she reached Market Street, and her father went on without

her, for it was now half-past eight. Jess Morse waved to her from a window, and in a moment came running out in a voluminous checked apron and a gay sweater-coat, hastily "shrugged" on.

"Where were you last night?" cried Laura. "We missed you dreadfully at the M. O. R. house."

"I—I really couldn't come," said her chum, hesitating just a little, for it was hard not to be perfectly frank with Laura, who was always so open and confidential with *her*. "Mother is so busy—she worked half the night——"

"Genius burns the midnight oil, eh?" laughed Laura.

"Yes, indeed. And now I'm about to make her toast and brew her tea, and she will take it, propped up in bed, and read over the work she did last night. Saturdays, when I am home, is mother's 'lazy day.' She says she feels quite like a lady of leisure then."

"But you should have come to the first big reception of the winter," complained her chum.

"Couldn't. But I heard that there was something very wonderful going to happen, just the same," cried Jess.

"What do you mean?"

"About the prize."

"My goodness me! Somebody is a telltale," cried Laura, laughing. "We were not going to spread the news until Monday morning."

Jess told her how the rumor of the prize had come to her ears.

"No use—it's all out, and all over town, if Bobby Hargrew got hold of it."

"But what's Mrs. Mabel Kerrick going to give the two hundred dollars *for?*"

"Oh, Jess! it's a great scheme, I believe—and it's mine," said Laura, proudly.

"But you don't tell me *what* it is," cried her chum, impatiently.

"It's to be given for the best play written by a Central High girl, between now and the first of January. Any girl can compete—even the freshies. And then we'll produce it, and get money for the M. O. R. building fund."

"A play!" gasped Jess, her face flushing.

"That's it. And the Lockwood girls are going to try for it—and so's Nell Agnew. Will you, Jess? Just think of two hundred dollars!"

"I *am* thinking of it," replied her chum. "Oh, Laura! I'm thinking of it all the time."

She said it so earnestly that Laura stared at her in amazement.

"My dear child!" she cried. "Does two hundred dollars mean so much to you?"

"I—I can't tell you how *hard* I want to win it," gasped Jess.

"Well! I'm going to try for it, too," laughed Laura, suddenly, seizing her friend's arm and giving it an affectionate squeeze. "But I *do* hope, if I can't win it, that you do!"

"Thank you, Laura!" replied her friend, gravely.

"And your mother's a writer—you must have talent, too, for writing, Jess."

"That doesn't follow, I guess," laughed Jess. "You know that Si Jones talks like a streak of greased lightning—so Chet says, anyway—but his son, Phil, is a deaf-mute. Talent for writing runs in families the same as wooden legs."

"So you do not believe that even a little reflected glory bathes your path through life?" chuckled Laura.

"I am not sure that I would want to be a professional writer like mother," sighed Jess, her mind dwelling on the trouble they were in. "There is a whole lot to it besides 'glory.'"

"Well, if I can't write the winning play, I hope you do, Jess," repeated Laura, going on after her father.

Jess returned to her work indoors. From the window, after a little, she caught sight of a whole string of boys sliding up the hill of Whiffle

Street on their skates, the big kite which Chet and Lance had raised supplying the motive power.

Chet beckoned her out to have a part in the fun; but much more serious matters filled Jess Morse's mind. When her mother finally arose, and folded and sealed and addressed the packet containing her night's work, Jess had to go out and mail it.

"I really believe that is a good story, Jess," said her mother, who was sanguine of temperament. She had a childish faith in the success of every manuscript she sent out; and usually when her chickens "came home to roost" her spirits withstood the shock admirably.

"Now, don't forget the list of things you were to get at Mr. Closewick's," added Mrs. Morse. Jess had kept her evening's troubles strictly to herself. "I believe he sent in a bill, but you tell him how it is; we'll have money in a day or two."

"But, Mother, we owe other stores, too," murmured Jess.

"I know it, child. But don't remind me——"

"And the rent will be due. Mr. Chumley was here last night——"

"Not for his rent so soon?" cried the irresponsible lady.

"But he is going to raise our rent—three dollars more after January first."

"Oh, how mean of him!" exclaimed Mrs. Morse.

"I don't see how we are going to get it, Mother," said Jess, worriedly.

"Well, that's true. But we've got another month before we need to cross *that* bridge."

That was Mrs. Morse's way. Perhaps it was as well that she allowed such responsibilities to slip past her like water running off the feathers of a duck.

"And if Mr. Closewick shouldn't want to—to trust us any longer, Mother?" suggested Jess. That was as near as she could get to telling the good lady what had really happened the night before.

"Why! that would be most mortifying. He won't do it, though. But if he does, we'll immediately begin trading elsewhere. I don't really think Mr. Closewick always gives us good weight, at that!"

Jess could only sigh. It was always the way. Mrs. Morse saw things from a most surprising angle. She was just as honest—intentionally—as she could be, but the ethics of business dealing were not quite straight in her mind.

And something must be done this very day to

put food in the larder. What little Jess had brought in from Mr. Vandegriff's store would not last them over Sunday. And her mother seemed to think that everybody else would be just as sanguine of her getting a check as she was herself.

"I do wish you had been able to get steady work with the *Courier,*" spoke Jess, as she prepared to go out.

"That would have been nice," admitted her mother. "And I am in a position to know a good deal of what goes on socially on the Hill. I am welcome in the homes of the very best people, for your father's sake, Jess. He was a very fine man, indeed."

"And for your own sake, too, Mamma!" cried Jess, who was really, after all, very proud of her mother's talent.

"It would have been nice," repeated Mrs. Morse. "And certainly the *Courier* is not covering the Hill as well as might be. I pointed that out to Mr. Prentice; but he is limited in expenditures, I suppose, the paper being a new venture."

It was on the tip of the girl's tongue to tell her mother of the visit of Mr. Prentice's sister-in-law the evening before. But why disturb her mother's mind with all that trouble? So she

said nothing, kissed her fondly, and sallied forth to beard in their lairs "the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker." And, truly, there were few girls in Centerport that day with greater lions in their way than those in the path of Jess Morse.

CHAPTER VII

THE HAND HELD OUT

When Jess came out of the house there was a group of her schoolmates—and not all of them boys—at the foot of the Whiffle Street hill. Being towed by Chet's big kite had become a game that all hands wanted to try. But the sun was getting warmer and the icy street would soon be slushy and the skates would cut through.

"I've had enough," said Bobby Hargrew, removing her skates when she spied Jess.. "The policeman has warned us once, and he'll be mad next time he comes around if we're here still."

"Better get your skates, Jess, and try it just once," urged Chet Belding, who was very partial to his sister's closet chum.

"I can't, Chet," replied Jess. "I must do my Saturday's marketing."

"Hullo! here's Short and Long!" cried Bobby, as a very short boy with very brisk legs came sliding down the hill with a big bundle under his arm.

Billy Long was an industrious youngster who only allowed himself leisure to keep up in athletics after school hours, because he liked to earn something toward his family's support.

"Stop and try a ride, Billy," urged Lance Darby, holding the cord of the tugging kite.

"Can't. Going on an errand."

"Hey, Billy! how's your dyspepsia?" demanded another of the boys.

Billy grinned. Bobby exclaimed:

"Now, don't tell me that Short and Long ever has trouble with his digestion—I won't believe it!"

"He sure had a bad case of it yesterday," drawled Chet Belding. "At least, so Mr. Sharp said. Billy spelled it with an 'i'."

"Let me use your knife a minute, please?" asked Bobby, who was still struggling with a refractory strap. "No! just toss it to me."

"That's all right," returned the small boy, with a grin, as he walked over and carefully handed Bobby the knife. "I don't take any chances with girls in throwing, or catching. All my sister can do is to throw a fit, or catch a cold!"

"Ow! isn't that a wicked statement?" cried Bobby. "You know it isn't so. But you're right down ignorant, Billy. You're just as bad

as Postscript was in Gee Gee's class one day this week."

"Who's 'Postscript'?" demanded Lance. "That's a new one on me."

"Why," said Bobby, her black eyes twinkling, 'I mean 'Adeline Moore. *That's* a postscript, isn't it?"

"What happened to Addie?" asked Jess, as the others laughed.

"Why, she got befuddled in reciting something about an Indian uprising that came in our American History hour. It's all review stuff, you know.

"'What is it that you call an Indian woman, Adeline?' Gee Gee asked, real sharp.

"And Addie jumped, and stammered, and finally said:

"'A' squaw, please, Miss Carrington.'

"'And what do you call her baby, then?' snapped Gee Gee.

"'A—a squawker,' says Addie, and the poor thing got a black mark for it. Wasn't that mean?"

"Miss Grace G. Carrington was in one of her moods," observed Chet, when the laugh had subsided.

"She's subject to moods," Lance drawled.

"No, she's not!" cried Bobby Hargrew.

"She only had one mood—the imperative—and we girls are all subject to that," and she sighed, for Bobby was frequently in trouble with the very strict assistant principal of Central High whom she disrespectfully referred to as "Gee Gee."

Jess and her friend had left the others now and were approaching Market Street. Like everybody else on the walks, they had to be careful how they stepped, and it was with many a laugh and gibe that Bobby Hargrew beguiled the way. Jess, however, was serious once more.

"Are you really going in for that prize Mrs. Kerrick is going to put up for us?" demanded Bobby.

"Do you know what it's for?"

"No—I haven't heard that," said the younger girl. "But for two hundred dollars I'd learn tatting—or darn socks. Daddy says I ought to learn to darn his. What's it all about, anyway? I suppose Laura knows?"

"Yes. It's a play. The girl who writes the best one, that can be acted by us boys and girls of Central High, is to get the prize."

"Gee! won't that be nuts for Miss Gould?" cried Bobby. "You know, she tried us out in blank verse the other day, and I made a hit. My stately lines were spoken of with commen-

dation. And when she told us to bring in a rhyme, or poetry—whichever we had the courage to call it—I wanted to read mine out loud. But she wouldn't let me. She said she had not intended to start a school for humorous poets."

"What did you hand in?" asked Jess, smiling.

"Want to hear it?" cried Bobby, eagerly, digging into her pocket which—like a boy's—was always filled with a conglomeration of articles. "Listen here!" she added, drawing forth a crumpled paper. "This is called 'Such is Life' and really, I was hurt that Miss Gould considered it so lightly," and she began to read at once:

"'William Wright was often wrong
And Thomas Goode was bad;
While Griffith Smiley, odd to state,
Was almost always sad.
Jedediah Rich was very poor,
While Ozias Poor was rich,
And Eliphalet Q. Carpenter
Earned his living digging ditch.
Tom White was black Jim Black was white,
And Jose Manuel Green was brown;
While Ching Ling Blu was yellow,
As was known all over town!'

I'd have made more of it," added Bobby, "only Miss Gould didn't seem to care for that kind of poetry. And I suppose if I tried my hand at a play that I would be unable to hit the popular taste," and she sighed.

"I guess they won't demand verse from us in this play," giggled Jess. "And that is most atrocious, Bobby."

"Think so?" returned her friend, her eyes twinkling. "And you'll do a whole lot better when it comes to writing your own play, I s'pose?"

"It won't be in verse—blank, or otherwise," admitted Jess.

"You really *are* going to try for it?"

"Why, Bobby, I'd love to win that two hundred dollars. I don't suppose I can. All the girls will try, I expect, and Laura, or Nell Agnew, will get it. But I want that two hundred dollars worse than I ever wanted anything in my life!"

She spoke so earnestly that Bobby was impressed. The latter glanced at her sidewise and a shrewd little smile hovered about her lips for a moment, which Jess did not observe.

"Where are you bound for, Jess?" she asked, abruptly.

"Marketing."

"You trade at Heuffler's market, don't you? That's right around the corner from father's store. Why don't you ever patronize *our* place for groceries. I'm drumming up trade," said Bobby, grinning.

"I guess our trade wouldn't amount to much," said Jess, flushing a little.

"'Every little bit added to what you've got makes just a little bit more,'" quoted Bobby. "And let me tell you, Mr. Thomas Hargrew keeps first-class goods and only asks a fair profit."

Jess laughed; but she caught at the straw held out to her, too. She knew it would be useless to go to Mr. Closewick's, where they usually traded. Was it honest to try and obtain credit at another grocery?

"I am afraid your father wouldn't welcome me as a customer," said Jess, gravely. "Ours isn't always a cash trade. Mother's money comes so very irregular that we have to run a bill at the grocery and the market and other places."

"Come on and give us a sample order," urged Bobby. "Father will be glad to get another book account. Now, if *you* were running a store I'd patronize it! We Central High girls ought to work together—just like a lodge. Come on."

She fairly dragged Jess by the hand into the store on Market Street, over the door of which Mr. Hargrew's name was displayed. The clerks were busy at the moment, but Mr. Hargrew was

at his desk in the corner. Bobby ran to him and whispered quickly:

"Here she is, Father. You remember what that Mrs. Brown said last night about old Closewick refusing her credit after her mother had traded there so long. And I am sure Jess is in trouble and needs help. Do wait on her, Father."

"If you say so, Bob," returned the big man, smiling down upon the girl who, he often said, "was as good as any boy." "You'll have to come into this store and share the business when you get older; and you might as well learn to judge customers now. And, if they *need* help——"

He came out to Jess Morse immediately, smiling and bowing like the suave storekeeper he was.

"Glad to see you, Miss. What can we do for you this morning?"

"Why—why," stammered Jess, "Bobby urged me to come in; but, really, Mr. Hargrew, it seems like asking a big favor of you, for we have never traded here much."

"We are always glad to make a new connection," said the storekeeper.

"But mother—we are obliged to ask for credit——"

"And that is what *I* have to do very frequently myself," interposed Mr. Hargrew, still smiling. "What is it you wish, Miss Morse? Your credit is good here, I assure you. You have brought the very best of reference—my daughter's. Now, what is the first article?"

Jess could have cried with relief! Somehow she felt that Bobby and her father must know of her need, yet not a word or sign from either betrayed that fact. And one would scarcely suspect harum-scarum Bobby Hargrew of engineering such a delicate bit of business.

Nevertheless, Jess was vastly encouraged by this incident. She went into the meat shop and purchased a small piece of lamb for over Sunday and Mr. Heuffler did not ask her for his bill. She hoped that "something would turn up" and watched the mails very eagerly, hoping that a fugitive check might come. But the postman never came near the little cottage at the elbow in Whiffle Street, all that day.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RACE IS ON

THERE was a rustle of expectancy—upon the girls' side, at least—at Assembly on Monday morning. Rumors of the prize offered for the best play written by a girl of Central High had aroused great interest and the school eagerly awaited Mr. Sharp's brief remarks regarding it.

"It is not our wish," said the principal, in the course of his speech, "to restrict the contestants in their choice of subjects, or in methods of treatment. The play may be pure comedy, comedy-drama, tragedy—even farce—or melodrama. Miss Gould will confine her lectures this week in English to the discussion of plays and play-making. Candidates for fame—and for Mrs. Kerrick's very handsome prize—may learn much if they will faithfully attend Miss Gould's classes. And, of course, it is understood that there must be no neglect of the regular school work by those striving for the laurel of the playwright.

"I doubt if we have any budding female

Shakespeares among us, yet I realize that the youthful mind naturally slants towards tragedy and the redundant phrases of the Greek and Latin masters, as read in their translation; but let me advise all you young ladies who wish to compete for the prize, to select a simple subject and treat it simply.

"Have your play display human nature as you know it, and realism without morbidness."

The girls of Central High who had heretofore excelled in composition naturally were looked upon as favorites in this race for dramatic honors. Among the Juniors, Laura Belding and Nellie Agnew always received high marks for such work. They possessed the knack of composition and were what Bobby Hargrew called "fluid writers."

"If it was a jingle or limerick, I'd stand a chance," sighed Bobby to herself. "But think of the sustained effort of writing a whole play! Gee! two hours and a half long. It would break my heart to sit still long enough to do it."

Jess Morse had never tried to more than pass in English composition. For the very reason, perhaps, that she had seen the practical side of such a career at home, she had not, like so many girls of her age, contemplated seriously literary employment for herself.

Lily Pendleton was known to have once essayed an erotic novel, and had read a few chapters to some of her closer friends. Bobby said it should have been written on yellow paper with an asbestos pad under it to save scorching Miss Pendleton's desk. Of course, Lily would attempt a play in the most romantic style.

The boys began to hatch practical jokes anent the play-writing before the week was out; and one afternoon Chet Belding appeared in a group of his sister's friends, and with serious face declared he had with him the outline and introductory scene of Laura's play, its caption being:

"The Poisoned Bathing-Suit; or, The Summer Boarder's Revenge."

Some of the girls—and not alone the Juniors like Laura, Nellie and Jess—were very serious about this matter of the play. Mrs. Kerrick's prize spurred every girl who had the least ability in that direction to begin writing a dramatic piece. Some, of course, did not get far; but the main topic of discussion out of school hours among the girls of Central High was the play and the prize.

Jess talked it over with her mother, and Mrs. Morse grew highly excited.

"Why, Josephine, dear, if you could win that prize it would be splendid! Then you could

have a new party dress—and a really nice one—and the furs I have been hoping to buy you for two seasons. Dear, dear! what a lot of things you really could get for that sum."

"I guess it would help us out a whole lot," admitted the girl. "We need so many things——"

"Why, I shouldn't allow you to use a cent of it for the household—or for me," cried her mother. "No, indeed."

"I haven't won it yet," sighed Jess. "But I guess if I did win it you'd have to take a part of it, Mother."

"Nonsense, child!" cried Mrs. Morse. "We'll have some checks in shortly. And we sha'n't starve meanwhile. Now, let us look over this plot you have evolved and perhaps I can suggest some helpful points—and show you how to write brisk dialogue. That is something the editors always praise me for—although I have never dared try a play myself. It is so hard to get a hearing before a really responsible manager."

Outside help for the girls was not debarred by the terms of the contest, so long as the main thread of plot in each play was original with the author, and she actually did the work. Jess listened to the practical suggestions of her mother in relation to her play; but all the time she had

upon her mind, too, the domestic difficulties that seemed to have culminated just now in a single great billow of trouble.

No money had come in. She had been obliged to go once more to Mr. Hargrew for groceries, and to the meat store and to Mr. Vandergriff's. Her mother could talk in her cheerful manner about what she could do with the two hundred dollar prize if she earned it. But Jess was very sure that she would not spend it for personal adornment—although no girl at Central High loved to be dressed in the mode more than Jess Morse.

"If such a *darling* thing should happen as my winning the prize, I'd put it all in the bank for a nest-egg," she thought. "Then, when checks do not come in, we would not have to ask for credit. We'd pay up all debts and start square with the world. And then—and then I'd be perfectly happy!"

The first of the month arrived, and with it Mr. Chumley. Mrs. Morse was busy at her desk and said:

"Just tell him, Josephine, that we will have it shortly. He needn't come again. I'll let you take it around to his house to him when I get it."

But this did not suit the old man, and he

pushed his way, for once, into the presence of the literary lady.

"Now, see here! Now, see here!" he cackled. "This won't do at all, Widder—this won't do at all! I want my money, and I want it prompt. And if you can't pay your present rent prompt, how do you expect to pay it next month, when you must find three dollars more? Now, tell me that, Ma'am?"

"Really, Mr. Chumley! You are too bad," complained Mrs. Morse. "I am so hard at work. You quite drive the ideas out of my head. I—I don't know what train of thought I was following."

Mr. Chumley snorted. "You'd better be huntin' the advertisement columns of a newspaper for a job, Widder," he said. "Them 'trains of thought' of yours won't never carry you nowhere. I gotter have my money. How are you going to get it?"

"I have never failed to pay you heretofore, have I?" asked the lady, bringing out her handkerchief now. "I think this is too bad——"

"But I want money!"

"And you shall have it. I have considerable owing to me—oh, yes! a good deal more than sufficient to pay your rent, Mr. Chumley. You will get it."

That was a very unsatisfactory interview for the landlord, and particularly so for Mrs. Morse. She complained when he had gone to Jess:

"Now, my day is just spoiled. I'm all at loose ends. It will cost me a day's work. Really, Josephine, if only people wouldn't nag me so for money!"

And Jess strove to shield her all that she could from such interviews. Mrs. Morse needed to live alone in a world with her brain-children. Meanwhile her flesh-and-blood child had to fight her battles with the landlord and tradesmen.

It was amid such sordid troubles that Jess evolved the idea for her play. The butterfly is born of the ugly chrysalis; out of this unlovely environment grew a pretty, idyllic comedy which, although crude in spots, and lacking the professional touch which makes a dramatic piece "easy acting," really showed such promise that Mrs. Morse acclaimed its value loudly.

"Oh, Mother! don't praise me so much," begged Jess. "The theme is good, I know. But it scares me. How can I ever dress it up to make it sound like a real play? It sounds so jerky and imperfect—that part that I have written, I mean."

"There is something a dramatic critic told me once that may be true," replied her mother. "It

was that the piece which reads smoothly seldom acts well; whereas a play that 'gets over the footlights' usually reads poorly. You see, action cannot be read aloud; and it is the action that accompanies the words of a dramatic piece that makes those words tell.

"I am not sure that Mr. Sharp and his committee will consider your play the best written, from a literary standpoint; but I understand that they have invited Mr. Monterey, the manager of the Centerport Opera House, to read the plays, too. And you, Josephine, write for *him;* for they will depend upon his judgment in the choice of the acting qualities of the piece."

This was good advice, as Jess very well knew. And she could barely keep her mind sufficiently upon her school work to pass the eagle scrutiny of Miss Grace G. Carrington, so wrapped up was she in the play. Not even to Laura did she confide any facts regarding the piece. Some of the girls openly discussed what they had done, and what they hoped; but Jess kept still.

Thursday came and in her mother's morning mail was a letter with the card of the Centerport *Courier* in the corner.

"Now, what can that be?" drawled Mrs. Morse, when Jess eagerly brought it to her. "They buy no fugitive matter, and I haven't

sent them anything since having my interview with Mr. Prentice. I really would have been happier to see a letter like that from one of the New York magazines; it might have contained a check in that case," and she slowly slit the envelope.

But Jess waited in the background with suppressed eagerness in her face and attitude. At once her thought had leaped to Mrs. Prentice. She had not told her mother a word about that lady's visit on Friday evening, nor her errand to the house. But if Mrs. Prentice was really "the power behind the throne" in the *Courier* office, she might easily put some regular work in the way of Mrs. Morse.

"Listen to this, child!" exclaimed her mother, having glanced hastily through the letter. "Perhaps I had better take this—for a time, at least. I don't like the idea of being tied down—it might interfere with my magazine work——"

"Oh, Mother!" cried Jess. "What is it?"

"Listen: Addressed to me, 'Dear Madam:—Will reconsider your suggestion of covering Hill section for society news. Can afford at least five dollars' worth of space through the week, and perhaps something extra on Sunday. Come and see me again. Respectfully, P. S. Prentice.' Well!"

"Oh, Mother!" repeated Jess. "What a splendid chance!"

"Why, Josephine, not so very splendid," said her mother, slowly. "He only guarantees me five dollars weekly. That is not much."

"It will feed us—if we are careful," gasped Jess.

"Goodness, Josephine! What a horribly practical child you are getting to be. I don't know what the girls of to-day are coming to. Now, that would never have appealed to me when I was your age. I never knew how papa and mamma got food for us."

Jess might have told her that conditions had not changed much since her girlhood!

"But five dollars regularly will help us a whole lot, Mother," she urged.

"And it will necessitate my going out considerably—and appearing at receptions and places. Really—I have refused a number of invitations because of my wardrobe. My excuse of 'work' is not always strictly true," sighed Mrs. Morse.

"But do, *do* try it, Mother!" cried Jess.

"Well," said the lady, "it may do no harm. And it may be an opening for something better. But, really, nobody must know that I am a mere society reporter on the Centerport *Courier*."

CHAPTER IX

A SKATING PARTY

THE girls of the Junior class in modern history were filing out on Friday.

"What do you know about that?" hissed Bobby Hargrew, in the ears of her chums. "Gee Gee is getting meaner and meaner every day she lives."

"What did she do to you now?" demanded Dora Lockwood, one of the twins.

"Didn't you notice? She sent Postscript to hunt up Moscow on the map of Russia. Now! you know very well that Moscow was burned in 1812!"

"You ridiculous child!" exclaimed Nellie Agnew. "You will never do anything in school but make jokes and try the patience of your teachers."

"I am no friend to teachers, I admit," confided Bobby to Dora and Dorothy. "Don't you think they ought to be made to earn their money?"

"Any teacher who is so unfortunate as to have you in his, or her, class, is bound to earn all the salary coming to them," declared Dorothy.

"Bad grammar—but you don't know any better," declared the harum-scarum. "You're just as bad as Freddie Atkinson. Dimple asked him who compiled the dictionary, and Freddie said, 'Daniel Webster.'

"'No, sir! Noah!' snapped Dimple.

"'Oh, Professor!' exclaimed Fred. 'I thought Noah compiled the Ark?'"

As the girls were laughing over this story of Bobby Hargrew's, Eve Sitz came up briskly. Laura and Jess were near at hand, and in a moment a group of the Juniors who always "trained together" were in animated discussion.

"Yes. It's frozen hard. Otto was on it with a pair of horses and our pung," declared Eve, who came in every morning from the country on the train, and whose father owned a big farm over beyond Robinson's Woods.

"What's frozen?" demanded Dora.

"Peveril Pond. It's as smooth as glass. I want you to all come over on Saturday afternoon; we'll have a lot of fun," declared Eve.

"You're always inviting us to the farm, Evan-

geline," said Nellie Agnew; "I should think your father and mother would be tired of having us overrun the place."

"Never you mind about them," declared Evangeline, smiling. "They love to have young folks around. Now, remember! Saturday at noon the autos will start from the Beldings' front door—if it doesn't snow."

"Oh, snow!" cried Bobby. "I hope not yet."

"'Beautiful snow! he may sing whom it suits—
I object to the stuff, 'cause it soaks through my boots!'"

"It's too bad," said Jess, "that Mrs. Kerrick didn't offer a prize for verse. Bobby would win it, sure!"

"Never you mind," said Bobby, with mock solemnity. "I may surprise you all yet. I am capable of turning out tragic stuff—you bet your boots!"

"Mercy, Bobby! how slangy you are getting," murmured Nell Agnew, the doctor's daughter.

"You think I cannot be serious?" demanded Bobby, very gravely. "Listen here. Here is what I call 'The Lay of the Last Minorca'—not the 'Last Minstrel!'

"'She laid the still white form beside those that had gone before,' quoth Bobby, in sepulchral tone.

"'No sob, no sigh, forced its way from her heart, throbbing as though it would burst.

"'Suddenly a cry broke the stillness of the place—a single heartbreaking shriek, which seemed to well up from her very soul, as she left the place:

"'"Cut, cut, cut-ah-out!"

"'She would lay another egg to-morrow.'"

"You ridiculous girl!" exclaimed Laura. "Aren't you ever serious at all?"

"My light manner hides a breaking hear-r-r-t," croaked Bobby. "You don't know me, Laura, as I really *are!*"

"Don't want to," declared Laura Belding, briskly. "It must be awful to be a humorist. All right, Eve. We'll come on Saturday. Chet will see Mr. Purcell about the big car. Lake Luna is frozen only at the edges, and is unsafe. But we will have a good time at Peveril Pond."

Fortunately Mrs. Morse received payment for a story in a magazine that week or Jess would never have had the heart to join the skating party. But the sum realized was sufficient to settle with Mr. Closewick, pay the month's rent of the cottage, and pay a part of each bill at Mr. Heuffler's and Mr. Vandergriff's shops.

These payments left Jess and her mother almost as badly off as they were before. And

there was the new account started at Mr. Hargrew's. But Chet Belding urged Jess very strongly to be his guest on Saturday, and there was really no reason why Jess should not go. Her mother had seen Mr. Prentice and begun furnishing items to the *Courier* from day to day; and the girl felt that, with care, they might be able to keep from getting so deeply into debt again.

No snow had fallen up to Saturday noon; but it was cold, and the clouds threatened a feathery fall before many hours. The young folk who gathered in the big hall of the Belding house thought little of the cold, however. There were warm robes and blankets in the Belding auto and in the sightseeing machine that Mr. Purcell had sent. Chet, in his bearskin coat, looked like the original owner of the garment—especially when he pulled the goggles down from the visor of his cap, and prepared to go out to the car.

"My dear fellow," drawled Prettyman Sweet, the dandy of Central High, who was of the party, "you look howwidly fewocious, doncher know! I wouldn't dwess in such execrable taste for any sum you could mention—no, sir!"

"Beauty's only skin deep, they say, Pretty," responded Chet. "So, if you were flayed, you might look quite human yourself."

"Purt" was gorgeous in a Canadian skating suit—or so the tailor who sold it to him had called it. It was all crimson and white, with a fur-edged velvet cap that it really took courage to wear, and fur-topped boots. And his gloves! they were marvels. One of them lying on the floor of the Beldings' hall gave Topsy, Mrs. Belding's pet terrier, such a fright that she pretty nearly barked her head off.

She made so much noise that Lance grabbed at her and tried to put her out of the room, Topsy still barking furiously.

"You look out!" drawled Bobby Hargrew. "One end of that dog bites, Lance!"

They turned Purt around and around to get the beauties of his costume at every angle. And they "rigged" him sorely. But the exquisite was used to it; he would only have felt badly if they had ignored his new "get-up."

"It's quite the thing, I assure you," he declared. "And, weally, one should pay some attention to the styles. You fellows, weally, dress in execrable taste."

When the party was complete they bundled into their wraps again and piled into the machines. Mrs. Belding had retired to her own room until the "devastation of the barbarians," as she called it, was past; but Mammy Jinny

straightened up the hall and dining room after the young folk with great cheerfulness.

"Yo' know how yo' was yo'self, Miss Annie, w'en yo' was oberflowin' wid de sperits ob youth," she said, soothingly.

"I am sure I never overflowed quite so boisterously," sighed Mrs. Belding.

"No. Yo' warn't one ob de oberflowin' kind, Miss Annie," admitted the old black woman. "But Mars' Chet an' Miss Laura, and dem friends ob theirs, sartain sure kin kick up a mighty combobberation—yaas'm!"

The wintry wind blew sharply past the crowd of Central High Juniors as the Belding auto and the bigger machine struck a fast pace when once they had cleared the city. There was lots of fun in the autos on the way to the Sitz farm; but they were all glad to tumble out there and crowd into the big kitchen "for a warm."

The Swiss family were the most hospitable people in the world. Eve's mother had a great heap of hot cakes ready for them, and there was coffee, too, to drive out the cold.

"We're going to take Patrick down to the pond with us to keep up the fires while we're skating," Eve told Laura. Eve looked very pretty in her skating rig, and she was a splendid skater, too. "Father and Otto are somewhere

down in the woods already. This cold weather coming on marks the time for hog killing, and some of the porkers have been running in the woods, fattening on the mast. There is an old mother hog that has gotten quite wild, and has a litter of young ones with her that are hard to catch. They may have to shoot her. So if you hear a gun go off, don't be alarmed."

The hired man, who stayed with the Sitzes all the year around, was a comical genius and the boys knew him well. As they started on the walk to the pond, Chet asked him:

"Do you skate yourself, Pat?"

"Sure, and it's an illegant skater I used to be when I was young," declared Pat; "barrin' that I niver had thim murderin' knives on me feet, but used ter skate on a bit of board down Donnegan's Hill."

"He'll never own up that he doesn't know a thing," whispered Eve to Laura and Jess, as the boys laughed over this statement of the Irishman. "He was planting potatoes in the upper field, and all by himself, last spring, and a man drove along the road, and stopped and asked him what kind of potatoes they were.

"'Sure, I know,' says Patrick.

"'Then what kind are they?' repeated the neighbor.

"'Sure, they're raw ones, Mr. Hurley,' says he, and Hurley came to the house roaring with laughter over it. Nothing feazes Patrick."

The long, sloping hill, under the chestnuts and oaks, would have made a splendid coasting place; only there was no snow on the ground.

"But when the snow *does* come," cried Dora Lockwood, "if the pond is still frozen over, won't it be a great course?"

"The ice is all right now, at any rate," Eve reassured them. "And there isn't a spring hole in the entire pond, Otto says."

Patrick had brought an axe and, with the help of some of the boys, soon had a big bonfire burning on the edge of the pond. Meanwhile the other boys helped the girls with their skate-straps, and then got on their own skates.

The ice hadn't a scratch on it. It was like a great plate of glass, and so clear in places that they could see to the bottom of the pond—where the bottom was sandy.

All the young folk were soon on the ice, the boys starting a hockey game at the far end, and the girls circling around in pairs at the end nearest to the fire.

"That's what Mrs. Case, our physical instructor, says we ought to learn," said Laura, watching the boys.

"And it's jolly good fun, too," cried Bobby.

"But suppose you turned your ankle, or fell down and tore your dress?" suggested Nellie. "I believe hockey on the ice is too rough."

"No game needs to be rough," declared Laura. "That isn't the spirit of athletics. Didn't we learn how to play basketball without being rough?"

"Even Hessie Grimes learned that," chuckled Bobby.

At that moment a gun was fired back in the thicker woods, and then out of the brush the girls saw an animal charging directly for the pond. Patrick saw it, too, and leaped up from before the fire and ran toward the beast.

"It's a big hog!" cried Bobby.

"That's the one they want to catch," said Eve. "She is ugly, too, I believe." Then she raised her voice in warning to Patrick: "Look out, Patrick! She is real cross."

"Faith!" returned the Irishman, half squatting down in the path of the charging sow. "It's not afraid I be of the likes of a pig. 'Tis too many of their tails I've twisted in ould Ireland, to run from wan in Ameriky——"

Just then the animal spied him and went for Patrick, full tilt. There wasn't time for the Irsihman to dodge; but he *did* spread his legs, and the angry mother-hog ran between them.

CHAPTER X

THE MID-TERM EXAMINATION

The girls, who were nearest the end of the lake, watched Patrick and the old hog in amazement. The boys came down from the far end with a chorus of yells and laughter.

For the Irishman, leaping up with his feet apart, descended on the back of the charging animal, with his face toward her tail!

The porker grunted her displeasure, and Patrick did some grunting, too; but he was not easily scared—nor would he be shaken off. He locked his arms tightly around the animal's body and hugged her neck with his legs, so that she could not bite him.

The creature kept up a deafening squealing, while out of the bush rushed Dandy, the farmer's dog. The boys came sweeping in from the lake to join in the sport—sport to everybody but the pig and Patrick! But Dandy got into the scrimmage first.

True to his instinct, the dog attempted to seize

the hog by the ear, but miscalculated and caught Patrick by the calf of the leg!

"Moses and all the children of Israel!" bawled the Irishman. "'Tis not fair to set two bastes onto wan! Call off yer dawg, Otto, or it's the death of him I'll be when I git rid of the hog."

But just then the poor hog got rid of him. She lay down and Patrick tumbled off, kicking at the dog. Dandy seemed much surprised to discover that he had locked his teeth on the wrong individual!

The boys were convulsed with laughter; but the girls were afraid that the Irishman had been seriously hurt. And, from the squealing of the hog, they were positive that *she* was suffering.

However, Mr. Sitz and Otto appeared, and tied the legs of the struggling beast, and so bore her away. They had already trapped her litter of young ones, and Patrick limped after his master and Otto, vowing vengeance against both the hog and the dog.

So the boys took turns in keeping up the fire on the shore, for although it was a clear day, the wind continued cold and blew hard. They were all glad to hover around the blaze, now and then; and especially so when they ate their luncheons.

Eve had prepared a great can of chocolate and the girls had all brought well-filled lunch boxes. Bobby was hovering about Laura's as soon as it was opened.

"Mammy Jinny's made you something nice, I know," she said. "Dear me, I'm so hungry! I wish I was like the Mississippi River."

"What's that for?" demanded Prettyman Sweet, who overheard her. "Like the Mississippi? Fawncy!"

"Then I'd have three mouths," exclaimed Bobby, immediately filling the mouth she *did* possess.

"My word! that wouldn't be so bad an idea, would it?" proclaimed Purt, who was a good deal of a gourmand himself.

"I don't think much of this jam pie," complained Chet, holding up a wedge that he had taken from his sister's basket.

"That's not jam pie!" exclaimed Laura. "Whoever heard of jam pie?"

"Yep. This is it," declared Chet. "The crusts are jammed right together. There ain't enough filling."

The wind increased toward the end of the day and it was hard to skate against it; but the young folk had a lot of fun sailing down the length of the pond with their coats spread for sails.

"That was a great scheme you suggested about the kite the other day, Laura," declared Lance Darby. "It was as good as an aeroplane."

"What would be the matter with hitching the kite to our scooter?" suggested Chet, who overheard him.

The two chums owned a small iceboat which went, on Lake Luna, by the name of "scooter."

"Say, old man! I've got a better scheme than that!" cried Lance, suddenly.

"What say?"

"Let's combine a flying machine with an iceboat and beat out everybody on the lake this winter?"

"Wow!" shouted his chum. "Now, you've been skating with Mother Wit and have caught her inventive genius—it's contagious. Gee! what an idea!"

"That's all right. Wait till you hear my scheme," said Lance, wagging his head.

"It ought to work fine," said Bobby Hargrew, with serious face. "All you will have to do when you are sailing along the ice and come to open water will be to turn a switch and jump right into the air. Save getting your feet wet."

"Laugh all you want to," said Lance, threateningly. "When we get it done you girls will be glad enough to ride in it."

"Not I!" cried Nellie Agnew. "I wouldn't ride on your old scooter as it is. And to combine a flying machine and iceboat—whew! I guess not."

The boys became enthusiastic, however, and they talked about it all the way home. Lance, however, kept the important idea regarding the new invention for Chet Belding's private ear.

Jess Morse enjoyed the outing that Saturday, as she always enjoyed such fun when with the Beldings; but, after all her mind was on her play. She almost lived that play nowadays!

And, to tell the truth, she began to neglect some of her studies in her concentration of mind upon "The Spring Road." Her mother praised it warmly.

"To think that I should have a daughter who may turn out to be a real genius!" cried Mrs. Morse. "Although it is *so* hard to get a play accepted by a first-class producer."

"No. I don't want to be a genius," said Jess shaking her head. "But I *do* want awfully to win that prize."

"Such a sordid child," said her mother, playfully. "I cannot imagine one's putting such emphasis on mere money. It isn't genius, after all, I fear. Our friends would call you eminently

practical, I suppose," and the irresponsible lady sighed.

But if Jess had no impractical thoughts regarding *why* she wished to win the prize, she made the mistake, just the same, of letting Miss Carrington catch her two or three times in recitation hour. Gee Gee was down on her like a hawk.

"Miss Morse, what does this mean?" demanded the stern teacher, eyeing Jess with particular grimness through her thick spectacles.

She had called the culprit to her desk just before the noon recess and now showed her the enormity of her offenses.

"You are falling back. There is something on your mind beside your textbooks, that is very sure, Miss Morse. I cannot lay it to athletics at present, I suppose, for there seems to be a slight let-up in the activities of you young ladies in that direction," and she smiled her very scornfullest smile. Miss Carrington abhorred athletics.

"But we have another matter interfering with the placid current of our school life. Are *you*, Miss Morse, one of the young ladies who are attempting to write a play?"

"Ye—yes, ma'am," stammered Jess, blushing to her ears.

"Ah! so I thought. I believe I can pick out all these playwrights by a reference to their recitation papers. And this afternoon comes our mid-term examination. Let me tell you, Miss Morse, that you must do better this afternoon, or I shall take your case up with Mr. Sharp."

She was folding and tying with a narrow ribbon some papers as she spoke, and her eyes snapped behind her glasses.

"These are the questions in my hands now, Miss Morse," said Gee. "And let me tell you, they are searching ones. Be prepared, Miss—be prepared!"

And she popped them into the top drawer on the right-hand side of her desk. But before she could shut down the roll top and so lock the desk, Miss Gould appeared at the door of the room and beckoned to Miss Carrington. The latter rose hurriedly and departed, leaving her desk open. And likewise leaving Jess Morse, her hungry eyes fixed upon that drawer in which the examination questions lay!

Just a peep at those papers might have helped Jess a whole lot in the coming hour of trial.

CHAPTER XI

MISSING

Alice Long, who was Short and Long's sister, was entertaining some of the girls when Jess Morse came into the recreation hall with something her little brother Tommy had said.

"Tommy's just going to school, you know, and he's beginning to ask questions. I guess he stumps his teachers in the primary grade. He heard the arithmetic class reciting and learned that only things of the same denomination can be subtracted from each other.

"'Now, you know that ain't so, Alice,' says he to me. 'For, can't you take four quarts of milk from three cows?'"

Jess didn't feel like laughing; what was coming after recess troubled her. She felt a certainty that she would fail, and she could not get over it.

"Besides," she said to herself, "Gee Gee will put the hardest questions on the list to me—I just know she will."

"What's the matter, Jess?" asked Laura,

coming up to her and squeezing her arm. "Something is troubling you, honey."

"And it will trouble you after recess," replied Jess, mournfully.

"The old exams?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Afraid, are you?" laughed Mother Wit.

"I'm just scared to death. And Gee Gee knows I'm not prepared and she will be down on me like a hawk."

"Maybe not."

"She knows I am weak. She just told me so, and she showed me the papers and said there were awfully hard questions in them. She just delights in catching us girls. And she says all of us who are trying for the prize are neglecting our regular work."

"I expect we are, Jess," admitted Laura. "Oh, dear! it's not easy to write a play, is it?"

"I don't know," said Jess, hesitatingly. "I'm not sure that I am writing a regular play. But I'm writing something!"

"What does your mother say about it?"

"Oh, of course she praises it. She would."

"I bet you win the prize, Jess!" exclaimed Laura.

"No such luck. And, anyway, I will take no prize this afternoon. Gee Gee threatens to take

my standing up with Mr. Sharp if I don't do well, too."

"Oh, don't worry, dear. Perhaps you will come out all right."

Bobby came swinging along and bumped into them. "Oh, hullo!" exclaimed she. "Say! how do you pronounce 's-t-i-n-g-y'? Heh?"

"Man or wasp?" returned Mother Wit, quickly.

Jess laughed. "You can't catch Laura with your stale jokes, Bobby," she gibed.

"That's all right; I asked for information. But you girls don't know anything. You're writing plays. That's enough to give you softening of the brain. The folks that know it all are the squabs," chuckled Boboby, referring to the freshman class. "What do you suppose one of them sprang this morning?"

"I haven't the least idea," spoke Laura.

"Why, she was asked to define the difference between instinct and intelligence, and she said: 'Instinct knows everything needed without learning it; but human beings have reason, so we have to study ourselves half blind to keep from being perfect fools!' Now, what do you know about that?"

"I believe that child was right," sighed Jess. "If I only had instinct I wouldn't have to worry

about the questions Gee Gee is going to give us this afternoon."

"Oh, say not so!" gasped Bobby, rolling her eyes and putting up both hands. "I am trying to forget about those exams—— There's the bell! Back to the mines!" she groaned, and rushed to take her place in the line.

The Junior class crowded into Miss Carrington's room and took their seats. The examination covered several of the more important studies. The teacher took her place, adjusted the thick glasses she always wore, and looked sternly over the room.

"Young ladies," she said, in her most severe manner, "I hope you are all prepared for the review. But I doubt it—I seriously doubt it. Some of you have been falling behind of late in a most astonishing manner, and I fear for your standing—I fear for it."

This manner of approaching the exam. was, of course, very soothing to the nervous girls; but it was Gee Gee's way and they should all have been used to it by this time. She had opened the drawer of her desk—the top right-hand drawer—and was fumbling in it.

Pretty soon she gave her entire attention to sorting the papers in this drawer, which seemed to be pretty full. As the moments passed, her

manner betrayed the fact that the teacher was much disturbed.

"Oh! I hope she's lost 'em!" exclaimed the wicked Bobby Hargrew.

"I don't," returned the girl she spoke to. "We'd suffer for it."

"Well, I got my fingers crossed!" chuckled Bobby. "She can't accuse me. I wasn't near her old desk."

"Wasn't it locked?" whispered another of the waiting girls.

Miss Carrington heard the bustle in the class, so she sat up and looked out over the room with asperity.

"I want to know what this means, girls," she said, snappily. "My desk was left open by chance while I was out of the room for perhaps ten minutes. The examination papers were in this drawer. Now I cannot find them. Has somebody done this for a joke?" and she looked hard in Bobby's direction.

"Look out, Bob," warned one of her mates; "crossing your fingers isn't going to save you."

But suddenly, even while she was speaking, Miss Carrington seemed to be stabbed by a thought. She started to her feet and turned her gaze upon the part of the room in which Jose-

phine Morse sat. And Jess's face was aflame!

"Miss Morse!"

Gee Gee's voice was never of a pleasing quality. Now it startled every girl in the room. Jess slowly arose, and she clung to the corner of her desk a moment for support.

"Do you remember seeing me put those question papers into this drawer? *Do* you?" demanded the teacher.

"Ye—yes, ma'am," replied Jess.

"You were standing right here at my desk?"

Jess nodded, while the whole class watched her now paling face. Many of the girls looked amazed; some few looked angry. Laura Belding's eyes fairly blazed and she half rose from her seat.

"Sit down, young ladies!" commanded Miss Carrington, who was quick to see these suggestive actions on the part of the class. "Come here to me, Miss Morse."

Jess walked up the aisle. After that first moment her strength came back and she held her head up and stared straight into the face of the teacher. The tears that had sprung to her eyes she winked back.

"I had called you to my desk, Miss Morse," said Gee Gee, in a low voice, and staring hard at the girl, "and had pointed out to you that

this particular examination would be a trying one. Is that not a fact?"

"Yes, ma'am," admitted Jess.

"Miss Gould called me and I hastily thrust the papers, which I particularly told you were the question papers, into this drawer. Did I not?"

"You did."

"And then I hurried out of the room without locking the drawer—without pulling down the roll top of the desk, indeed. Is that not so, Miss Morse?"

"It is," said Jess, getting better control of her voice now.

"And you were left standing here. The other girls were gone. Now, Miss Morse, I freely admit that I am culpable in leaving such important papers in the way. I should have locked them up. I presume the temptation was great——"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Carrington!" exclaimed the girl, more indignant than frightened now. "You are accusing me without reason. I would not do such a thing——"

"Not ordinarily, perhaps," interposed Miss Carrington. "But it all came to you in a moment, I presume. And you did not have time to put them back."

This she had said in a low voice, so that nobody but Jess heard her. But the girl's voice rose higher as she grew hysterical.

"Miss Carrington, you are unfair! I never touched them!"

"You must admit, Miss Morse, that circumstances are very much against you," declared the teacher.

"I admit nothing of the kind. A dozen people might have been in the room while you were out and the desk was open. Ten minutes is a long time."

"You seem to have thought out your defense very well, Miss Morse," said Gee Gee, sternly. "But it will not do. It is too serious a matter to overlook. I shall send for Mr. Sharp," and she touched the button which rang the bell in the principal's office.

CHAPTER XII

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE

"COME to order!" commanded Miss Carrington, rapping on her desk with a hard knuckle.

She quickly gave the class in general a task and sent Jess to her seat.

"I will speak with you later, young lady," she said, in her most scornful way.

Jess's eyes were almost blinded by tears when she went back to her seat. But they were angry tears. The unkind suspicion and accusation of the teacher cut deeply into the girl's soul. She could see some of the girls looking at her askance —girls like Hester Grimes and Lily Pendleton, and their set. Of course, they had not heard all that Miss Carrington said; but they could easily suspect. And the whole class knew that the trouble was over the disappearance of the papers for the review.

Bobby wickedly whispered to her neighbor that she hoped the papers wouldn't ever be found. But that would not help Jess Morse out of trouble.

To Jess herself, hiding her face behind an open book, the printed page of which was a mere blur before her eyes, it seemed as though this trouble would overwhelm her. It was worse than the poverty she and her mother had to face. It was worse than having no party dress fit to be seen in. It was worse than being refused credit at Mr. Closewick's grocery store. It was worse than having old Mr. Chumley hound them for the rent.

Reviewing the whole affair more calmly, Jess could understand that Miss Carrington would consider her guilty—if she could bring herself to think any girl of Central High would do such a thing.

Jess sat there, dumb, unable to work, unable to concentrate her mind on anything but the horribly unjust accusation of her teacher. How she disliked Gee Gee!

The other girls were not particularly devoted to the task set them for the moment, either. Laura did not sit very near her chum in this room. She asked permission to speak with Jess and Miss Carrington said:

"No, Miss Belding; sit down!" and she said it in her very grimmest way. Usually the teacher was very lenient with Mother Wit, for of all her pupils Laura gave her the least trouble.

A feeling of expectancy controlled the whole roomful of girls. It came to a crisis—every girl jumped!—when the door opened and Mr. Sharp walked in.

The principal of Central High seldom troubled the girls' class rooms with his presence. When he addressed the young ladies it was usually *en masse*. He trusted Miss Carrington, almost entirely, in the management of the girls.

His rosy cheeks shone and his eyes twinkled through his glasses as he walked quickly to the platform and sat down beside Gee Gee at her table, which faced the girls, whereas her rolltop desk was at the rear of the platform, against the wall of the room.

Principal and teacher talked in low voices for some moments. Mr. Sharp cast no confusing glances about the room. He ignored the girls, as though his entire business was with their teacher.

At length he looked around, smiling as usual, Mr. Sharp was a pleasant and fair-minded man and the girls all liked him. He had their undivided attention in a moment, without the rapping of Miss Carrington's hard knuckle on the table top. Bobby said that that knuckle of Gee Gee's middle finger had been abnormally developed by continued bringing the class to order.

"Young ladies!" said Gee Gee, snappily. "Mr. Sharp will speak to you."

The principal looked just a little annoyed—just a little; and for only the moment while he was rising to speak. He never liked to hear his pupils treated like culprits. He usually treated them at assembly with elaborate politeness if he had to criticise, and with perfect good-fellowship if praise was in order. This little scene staged by Miss Carrington grated on him.

"Our good Miss Carrington," said he, softly, "has sustained a loss. Important papers have been mislaid, we will say."

He raised his hand quickly when Miss Carrington would have spoken, and she was wise enough to let him go on in his own way.

"Now, the question is: How have the papers been lost, and where are they at the present moment? It is a problem—in deduction, we will say. We must all partake of the character of some famous detective. It used to be a rule in our family when I was a boy that, if a thing were lost, it was wisest to look for it in the most unlikely places first. I can remember once, when father lost a horse, that mother insisted in shaking out all the hens' nests and giving them new nests. But father never *did* find that horse."

The girls had begun to smile now; and some

of them giggled. Miss Carrington looked as she usually did when Mr. Sharp joked—it pained her and set her teeth on edge. Bobby declared she looked as though she had bitten into a green persimmon.

"Joking aside, however," continued the principal. "This loss is a serious matter. Suppose you young ladies suggest how the question papers to be used in this mid-term examination have been whisked out of this drawer of Miss Carrington's desk, and hidden elsewhere? Can it be possible that it is the prank of a pixy? Of course, all of you young ladies are too serious-minded to do such a thing yourselves."

There was a general laugh, then, and the strain of the last few minutes began to be relieved. Somehow, even Jess Morse felt better.

"To suggest that anybody in this class—the Junior class of Central High—would deliberately misappropriate these questions is beyond imagination," declared Mr. Sharp, with sudden gravit. "It is a mistake. The mistake is explainable. Has anyone a suggestion to make?"

It was Laura Belding who broke the silence. She asked her question very modestly, but her cheeks were flushed, and she was evidently indignant.

"Is—is it positive that the papers were put in

that top drawer that Miss Carrington now has open?"

"Ask Miss Morse!" snapped the teacher, before Mr. Sharp could reply.

"We will. Nothing like corroboration," said the principal, with a bow and smile. "Miss Morse?"

"Yes, sir," said Jess, in a low voice, rising. "I saw her put them there. She tied them into a bundle by themselves."

"You are observant, Miss Morse," said the principal, smiling again. "Thank you. Now, Miss Belding?" for Laura was still standing.

"I notice that the drawer is very full," said Laura, quietly. "May I come upon the platform and look at it?"

"Certainly," responded Mr. Sharp; but Miss Carrington flushed again, and exclaimed:

"I have searched that drawer thoroughly. The papers are not there."

Again Mr. Sharp made a little deprecatory gesture. "Come forward, Miss Belding," he said.

Mother Wit gave her chum a single reassuring glance. Somehow, without reason, that look comforted Jess. She still stood beside her desk, too anxious to sit down again, while Laura walked quietly forward.

"That drawer is very full, Mr. Sharp," she said, composedly enough. "May I take it out?"

"Oh, I've had it out and felt behind it," urged Miss Carrington, all of a flutter now.

"Maybe Miss Belding can show us something we did not know," said the principal, in his bantering way. It had been he who gave Laura her nickname, and he thought a great deal of the girl. He knew that she had some serious intention or she would not have come forward.

Laura pulled out the over-full drawer and set it down upon the carpet.

"Oh, it isn't there," said Miss Carrington. "The packet was tied with a mauve ribbon—a narrow ribbon——"

Laura pulled out the next drawer.

"Oh, that's quite useless," exclaimed the lady teacher. "And to have everything disarranged in this way——"

"We must give the counsel for the defense every opportunity, Miss Carrington," said the principal softly.

Laura drew out the third drawer—just glancing at the top layer of papers—and then the fourth and last. No bundle tied with a mauve ribbon appeared.

"Not there!" exclaimed Gee Gee, and was there a spice of satisfaction in her voice?

But Laura dropped upon her knees, ran her arm to the shoulder into the aperture where the last drawer came out, and drew forth the missing packet of papers, which lay crowded back upon the carpet.

"There!" said Mr. Sharp, quite in a matter-of-fact tone, "I have suggested to the Board of Education more than once that all these old unsanitary desks should be done away with. The only roll-top desk fit to use in the schools are those which stand upon feet, the bottom of the lower drawer being a few inches from the floor. Thank you, Miss Belding! We will now go on with the afternoon session."

But he rested his hand for a moment upon Laura's shoulder, as she was about to step down after returning the drawers to their places in the desk.

"The counsel for the defense did very well," he whispered, and then left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

Mr. Sharp had relieved Miss Carrington of the embarrassment of his presence; but she certainly was troubled by the untoward incident. Laura returned to her seat by the way of Jess's and boldly squeezed her hand. And Jess thanked

her, in her heart. The rebound from being suspected of the loss of the papers gave her such relief that the coming examination seemed much less terrible. Or perhaps, Miss Carrington was, after all, a little easy on her that afternoon; for Jess Morse came through the grilling with surprisingly high marks.

CHAPTER XIII

A WAY IS OPENED

But Jess had had ample warning. There would be something important heard from Gee Gee if she neglected the regular work of her classes to devote time and thought to that wonderful play.

It was hard to keep her mind off a task that had so gripped her heart and mind. "The Spring Road" was in her thought almost continually. She even dreamed about it at night. And it was a veritable wrench to get her mind off the idyl of youth she was writing to set it upon the grim realities of Latin, English, the higher mathematics, and other school tasks.

It seemed to Jess Morse as though no other piece of writing could ever be so enthralling as this she had undertaken. When she had begun it it was with fear and trembling. The two hundred dollar prize was what spurred her to the task. But now, she fairly loved it!

"The Spring Road" was a fantasy—a comedy

—a love story; it was all three in one, and she was writing it with the limitations of those who would probably play it, in mind.

Many of the contestants for Mrs. Kerrick's prize thought not at all about the players; but already in Jess's mind was fixed who, of her schoolmates, would best fit into the parts. There was a character who could not gain much sympathy from the audience, but who could wear beautiful clothes—that would just suit Lily Pendleton.

And for the Spring Spirits, in the allegory, *Budding Tree* and *Laughing Brook,* who could be better fitted than Dora and Dorothy Lockwood? While the heroine of the story must be beautiful Kate Protest, of the Senior class, and the *Truant Lover* the sparkling Launcelot Darby.

At home matters were not going as smoothly as Jess had hoped, after her mother obtained regular work upon the Centerport *Courier.* It was nice to get the money regularly for that work; but somehow Mrs. Morse could not see the wisdom of "paying as you go." Jess could not always take cash with her when she went to the stores; and if her mother chanced to be out herself and saw something particularly nice that Jess was likely to fancy, she ordered it in without regard to how it was to be paid for.

But that had always been Mrs. Morse's way. She was over-generous with Jess while she, herself, went with shabby gloves and mended shoes. But any sensible plan of retrenchment in their household expenses had never been evolved in *her* mind.

How they were to meet the added burden of the January rent never seemed to trouble her. Jess only spoke of it once during that first fortnight in December; then it disturbed her mother so much that the lamp of genius refused to burn for a whole day, and, with a sigh, the girl gave over discussing the point.

Checks for her mother's stories came few and far between these days. Jess feared that they would soon owe Mr. Hargrew as large a bill as they had at Mr. Closewick's store. And as for a new dress—well, the idea of that was as far in the offing as ever.

All the girls she knew well were so busy scribbling away at their prize plays that, had Jess been free herself out of school hours, she would have been unable to find any of her usual companions at leisure.

Even Chet Belding, who was always at her beck and call, was terribly busy these days. He and Lance Darby were hard at work upon some wonderful sort of ice craft they were building

down in Monson's old boathouse, near the Girls' Branch Athletic League field and boathouse.

Each day saw the wintry winds grow colder, and soon the ice upon Lake Luna was thick enough to bear. Some of the more reckless boys had skated out to the steamboat channel, which had been sawed from the open water in the middle of the lake, so that the freight boats from Lumberport and Keyport could get to their docks.

Ice of such thickness on Lake Luna at this early date, however, surprised even that apocryphal person, "the oldest inhabitant." And Jess Morse would have been glad of a new coat, or the set of furs that her mother had talked about. When she started for school some mornings, the first blast of keen air off the lake seemed to cut through her like a knife. She wouldn't have had her mother know how really thin her apparel seemed for anything in the world.

And, very wisely, she kept up her gym. work faithfully. A few minutes' vigorous exercise after the regular day's work at school was finished put her in a glow, made her breathe more deeply and "put a shine in her eyes," as Bobby expressed it.

"There isn't a girl in the class who doesn't need brisking up in the gym. this weather—unless it's Eve Sitz," confided Bobby to Laura and

Jess as they left the gymnasium building together one afternoon. "Girls are just like cats; they all like to mope around the register or the steam radiator in cold weather. Why, Lil Pendleton wears a lace shawl over her shoulders in the house, and hangs over the gas-log like an old woman. We all ought to get back into basket-ball—and at the rowing machines—again. Once a week on the court isn't enough to keep us alive."

"If you knew the number of things Eve Sitz does, in and out of doors, before she comes to school in the morning, and after she gets home again, you wouldn't wonder that she keeps her color, and is so brisk and strong," laughed Laura.

"I expect she *is* a busy little bee," admitted Bobby.

"She helps milk the cows night and morning——"

"There!" interrupted the irrepressible Bobby. "That's what I've always intended to ask Eve; but I forget it."

"What's that?" asked Jess.

"Why, when you have finished milking a cow, how do you turn the milk off?"

"Isn't she the ridiculous girl?" chuckled Laura, as Bobby ran up the side street toward her own door. Then Mother Wit turned on her

chum, with her brisk, bird-like way: "How's the play going, Jess?"

"I'm—I'm afraid it's finished," said her chum, slowly.

"'Afraid!'" repeated Laura, in amazement.

"Yes. As far as I *can* finish it."

"But you're not going to give it up in the middle?" cried Laura.

"No. It is complete. Only it doesn't satisfy me," returned Jess, shaking her head. "And it never will."

"Ah! there speaks real genius!" declared Laura, smiling.

"Don't you believe it," was her friend's hasty reply. "I just don't know enough to write it well enough to suit me."

"Modesty!"

"Sense," corrected Jess, laughing a little dolefully. "How are you getting along?"

"Just as Mr. Sharp said, I am no female Shakespeare," said Laura. "But I have hopes that maybe my play isn't so bad."

Jess was not sanguine about "The Spring Road," however. She knew that it might be written so much better, if one only knew how!

And while they discussed the play Jess heard somebody calling her by name. Laura grabbed her arm and pointed.

"Isn't that Mrs. Prentice—the very rich Mrs. Prentice—in her electric runabout? And, I declare, Jess! she's calling to you."

"Yes. I know her; she wants me," said Jess breathlessly, and she ran across the street to where the electric car was standing beside the curb.

"I want you, child," said the lady, with decision. "Can you excuse yourself to your friend?"

Jess waved her hand to Laura, and called:

"I'll be up after supper, dear."

Laura nodded, and smiled, and went on; but she was evidently puzzled as she turned to gaze after the runabout as it moved off swiftly with her chum beside the lady in the magnificent furs.

"And how are you and your mother getting along?" asked Mrs. Prentice, as soon as the car had started.

"Why—why about as usual, Mrs. Prentice," stammered Jess, who was much puzzled as to why the lady should want her to take this ride. "Only mother is regularly employed by Mr. Prentice, and is very grateful for the work—as you must know, ma'am."

"Oh, don't speak of that," said Mrs. Prentice, laughing. "I fancy that Pat is getting full measure for his money; he usually does. But tell me,

child, are you going to remain in that cottage of Mr. Chumley's?"

"Why—I really don't know, Mrs. Prentice. There seems no other place to go——"

"He is horribly overcharging you, child," said the lady, quickly.

"I know. But there are so few small places in decent neighborhoods—mother says she doesn't know what to do about it."

"I fancy, Jessica—— Is that your name?"

"Josephine, Mrs. Prentice; only they all call me Jess."

"Very well—Jess. Sounds a good practical name—and you are a practical girl; I can see that. Now, Jess, I fancy you have to do something yourself toward moving, to get your mother started, eh?"

"Oh! but I don't know where to go——"

The car began to slow down. Mrs. Prentice had run into a quiet side street, not two blocks from the cottage at the foot of Whiffle Street.

"See here," said the lady, stopping the motor and preparing to alight. "I want you to see this little dove-cote—that's what I have always called it. It is set behind a grassy front yard and there is a little garden at the back. You'll love it in spring and summer."

"Oh, but Mrs. Prentice, is it empty?"

"It's too empty. That's the trouble. The tenant I had left unexpectedly." She neglected to say that she had paid the tenant a certain sum to leave the cottage and move into another house. "I don't want the house empty during the cold weather. I have paid to have a fire kept up in the furnace for a week so that the pipes would not freeze. Come in."

It was a dear little cottage; Jess Morse was delighted with it. And so much more convenient than Mr. Chumley's. Besides, there was a good reason why the owner paid to have the fires kept up all this week of cold weather. Every room was fresh with paint and paper—the smell of varnish was still plain. It was really a delightful little place and the furniture at home would fit into the several rooms so nicely!

Jess Morse saw all this at once. She was delighted—— And two dollars less a month than the cottage in which they had lived so long!

"It is a way opened, Mrs. Prentice!" she murmured. "Better than we could ever expect. I thank you from the very bottom of my heart!"

CHAPTER XIV

IN SUSPENSE

But when Jess got home—and Mrs. Prentice took her there in the car, but would not come in herself—she had hard work to satisfy her mother that such a change as this opportunity suggested was a good one for them to make. In short, Mrs. Morse did not enthuse.

"Just think of the trouble of it all," she sighed. "My dear Jess, we have been here so long——"

"But Mr. Chumley doesn't want us any longer," interposed Jess.

"Tut, tut! that is only the old gentleman's way. He really will not raise our rent, do you think?"

"Why, Mother!" expostulated the girl, "he has already raised it and threatened to put us out if we don't find the increased three dollars on the first."

"I am afraid you were not politic enough," said her mother.

"One cannot be politic with Mr. Chumley.

He wants his house for another tenant; he has as good as said so. And *do* come and see Mrs. Prentice's little cottage. It is a *love.*"

Even after she had seen it, however, Mrs. Morse was doubtful. She shrank from the change.

"And think of the expense of moving," she declared.

"But the two dollars less we pay a month will soon pay for *that,*" said Jess, eagerly.

"Well—er—perhaps," admitted her mother, doubtfully.

Jess had to do it all, however. She had to attend to every detail of the change. Fortunately her mother received a check of some size and the daughter obtained a part of it for current expenses. She hired a truckman, packed most of their possessions after school hours, and saw to the setting up of their goods and chattels in the new home.

There were several tons of furnace coal in the cellar of the new home. In the old cottage there had been no heater. Mrs. Prentice told Jess that she could pay for the coal a little at a time, and the girl gladly availed herself of this advantage.

For the winter promised to be a severe one. Since frost had set in in earnest there had been no let-up. Jess and her mother moved during

the short holiday vacation. The day school closed; the contestants for the prize offered by Mrs. Kerrick handed in their plays. The announcement of the successful one would be after the intermission—on the first Monday of the New Year.

When the Morses really came to remove their goods from the house in which they had lived so long, old Mr. Chumley would have liked to get out an injunction against their doing so.

"I never thought you'd do it, Widder!" he croaked, having hurried over the minute he heard the moving man was at the door. "Why—why mebbe we could have split the difference. P'r'aps three dollars a month more was a leetle steep."

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Mrs. Morse. "Really, Mr. Chumley, this is Jess's doings. She thinks the change will be better for us——"

"Now then! I wouldn't let no young'un snap me like I was the end of a whip!" cried the old man. "You bundle your things back into the house, and we'll call it only a one-fifty raise."

But here Jess interfered. "Are you prepared to take two dollars off the rent, instead of adding any, and will you make the repairs we have been asking for all this year, Mr. Chumley?" she demanded, briskly.

"My goodness me! I can't. It ain't possible.

The property don't bring me enough as it is."

"Then there's no use talking to us," said Jess, drawing her arm through her mother's. "Mrs. Prentice's house is all freshly done over, and has a heater, which this house hasn't, and everything is in spick and span order."

"That Mrs. Prentice! I might ha' knowed it!" cackled Mr. Chumley. "And she was for having you arrested for stealing once."

This was the very first Mrs. Morse had heard about the night Jess had had her queer experience, and she had to be told all about it now. She saw at once that her own regular work for the *Courier* arose out of her daughter's acquaintance with the wealthy Mrs. Prentice.

"And she is one of the leaders in our Hill society!" gasped the poor lady. "I declare! I shall never be able to face her again—although I have only a bowing acquaintance with her. She will very well know who is putting all the society items into the paper."

"Well, it's honest," said Jess, stubbornly.

"My goodness me! How practical you are, Jess," exclaimed her mother. "Isn't anything but bread-and-butter, and such things, appealing to you in life, child?"

Jess did not answer. She was naturally as frivolous of mind as any other girl of her age,

only the happenings in their domestic life of the last few weeks had made her far more thoughtful.

And really, the little dove-cote, as Mrs. Prentice had called their new home, was a veritable love of a place! Mrs. Morse had to admit herself that it was a great improvement over the house where they had lived so long.

As it was vacation week, she let Jess go right ahead to settle things while she stuck to the typewriter. And Jess was glad to have plenty to occupy her mind. The suspense of waiting for the committee to decide upon the winner of the prize was hard to endure indeed.

One evening, however, Chet came after her, for there was a big moonlight skating party on Lake Luna. By this time people who had horses and sleighs had made quite a trotting course from Centerport to Keyport in one direction, and from Centerport to Lumberport at the other end of the lake.

There were certain motor enthusiasts, too, who had rigged their cars so that they would travel on the ice; but Chet Belding and Lance Darby had beaten them all. The trotting course hugged the shore, the skaters followed the same course, but farther out on the ice, and beyond, toward the middle of the lake, the iceboats had free

swing. And there were several very fast "scooters" and the like upon Lake Luna.

But Laura's brother and his chum declared that "they'd got 'em all beat to a stiff froth!" And on this night they produced the finished product of their joint work for the last several weeks.

"What do we call it? The *Blue Streak!*" declared Chet. "And that's the way she travels. We tried her out this morning and—— Well, you girls will admit that you never traveled fast before."

"My goodness me, Laura! Do you think it is safe for us to venture with them?" demanded Jess.

"If Chet brings me home in pieces he knows what mother will do to him," returned her chum, laughing.

The novel boat certainly attracted considerable attention when the boys ran it out of the old boathouse and pushed it far away from the skating course. It combined the principles of an aircraft with runners of the familiar iceboat.

"Just call it an aero-iceyacht, and let it go at that," said Chet. "That hits it near enough."

"And it really can sail in the air or on the ice —like a hydroplane?" demanded Jess.

"You'll think so," Chet assured her.

The boat was driven by a propeller similar to those on aeroplanes; and this propeller was fastened to the crossbeam on which were the two forward runners—somewhat similar to the mast on the ordinary lake iceboat. The body and rudder plank, at right angles to this crossbeam, supported the two-cylinder gasoline engine, which Chet bought at the motor repair shop of Mr. Purcell.

It was a fourteen-horse-power engine, water-cooled, and geared with a chain to the propeller.

"We tried a belt first," said Lance; "but the blamed thing slipped so that old Chet evolved the chain-gear idea. Great, eh?"

"How can we tell till we see it work?" demanded Laura.

"And you don't have to lie down for 'low bridge' when the boom goes over on this ice-yacht!" cried Jess, enthusiastically. "We can sit up."

"All the time," agreed Lance.

"I think it's simply great!" declared Laura.

"All because you, Mother Wit, suggested using the kite for motive power that day," said her brother, admiringly. "That gave us the idea. If a kite would give motive power to a man skating, why not use a more up-to-date air-power scheme on the ice?"

"And it worked!" shouted Lance.

"Oh, hurry!" cried Jess. "I'm crazy to see how it sails."

The boys placed the girls amidships, and showed them how to cling to the straps on either side. Lance took his place on the crossbeam—to act as weight on either end if such balance was needed; Chet took the tiller.

"Open her up;" the latter commanded his chum. "Only quarter round with the switch when the engine gets her stroke. Now, careful! Hang on, girls!"

The next moment the engine began to throb regularly, and the blades of the propeller whirled. In half a minute they had gained such momentum that the eye could not distinguish the blades themselves—they simply made a blur in the moonlight.

The craft lunged ahead.

CHAPTER XV

A MILE A MINUTE

THE moon, hanging low upon the horizon, was young but brilliant. The air was so keen and clear that without the help of the moonlight it seemed as though the stars must have flooded the lake with white light.

Nearer the southern shore the jingle of sleigh-bells and the laughter and shouting of the skaters marked the revelers who gave a free course to the ice-boats out here nearer the open water. For both east and west of Cavern Island, which lay in the middle of Lake Luna, opposite Centerport, the ice was either unsafe, or there were long stretches of open water. The freight boats up and down the lake kept this channel open.

But there was a wide and safer course before the flying aero-iceboat. And soon she was moving so fast that the girls heard nothing but the shriek of the wind rushing by.

Here and there before them lanterns glowed like huge fireflies. These lights were in the rigging of several ice-yachts. Chet and Lance had

a pair of automobile searchlights rigged forward on their own boat.

Another yacht had started from the old boat-house at about the time our friends and their new-fangled craft got under way. There were girls aboard it, too; but at first the Beldings and Jess and Lance did not recognize the other party.

The strange yacht was distinguished, however, by a red and green lamp. As Chet had been slow in starting, the other boat got ahead. But now, although the wind was fair and the other yacht traveled splendidly, the aero-iceboat bore down upon it, beating it out and leaving it behind like an express train going by a freight.

However, Chet would not allow Lance to throw on all speed. There were too many other craft on the ice before them—and it was night.

The lights of the City of Centerport soon fell behind them; then, almost at once, they picked up the lights of Keyport at the extreme end of the lake. They were traveling some!

Chet had strapped on a megaphone, which he had borrowed from Short and Long, who was coxswain of the boys' Central High eight-oared shell, and through this he shouted his orders to Lance. They ran down within a mile of Keyport, and then shut off the engine and circled about on the momentum they had gained. There

were too many skaters and sleighs on the ice down here to make ice-boating either safe or pleasurable.

"My goodness me! Wasn't that fun?" gasped Jess.

"Felt like you was traveling some, eh?"

"Oh, Chet! it was great!"

"It certainly is a fine boat, Bobby," agreed Laura. "You and Launcelot have done well."

"Wait!" said Lance, warningly.

"Wait for what?" demanded Laura.

"We didn't travel that time. We were only preparing you—warming her up, as it were. Wait till we let her out."

"My goodness!" cried Jess. "Can you go faster?"

"We'll show you, going home," said Chet.

Just then the boat with the green and red light swooped down upon them and a voice shouted:

"What kind of a contraption is that you've got there, Belding?"

"Hullo!" exclaimed Chet. "That's Ira Sobel's yacht. Ira is Purt Sweet's cousin." Then he answered: "Oh, this is a little rigging of my own, Mr. Sobel. But she can travel. Rather beat's your *Nighthawk,* eh?"

"Well, she did that time," admitted Sobel, doubtfully.

"My goodness me!" the friends heard the Central High dandy exclaim. "I weally wouldn't want to travel any faster, Ira. I—I haven't weally got my breath yet!"

"Oh, I say!" cried another voice from the ice-boat, and they recognized Lily Pendleton's. "What do you think about the prize? Did you hear?"

"Why, they haven't decided on the best play yet, have they?" returned Jess, eagerly, and before her chum could speak.

"No. But I heard they'd put it all into Mr. Monterey's hands. He's the manager of the Opera House, you know. And mother is very well acquainted with him. You girls laughed at my play——"

"Not I, Lily," interrupted Laura, good-naturedly. "I was too afraid that the rest of you might have a chance to laugh at mine."

"Well, I bet I've a good chance to win. Mr. Monterey is real nice, and mother is going to see him."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Chet. "She's one of those people who think influence brings things about. Don't you be worried, girls; I bet Mr. Sharp won't let anybody get that prize through favoritism."

"That's very encouraging, Chet," said Jess.

"But perhaps Lily will win it. You know, she goes to plays more than any other girl in the Junior class of Central High, that's true. And she reads novels—real silly ones. Maybe she knows how to write just what would please a theatrical manager."

"Pooh!" said Laura, "I'm not giving up all hope yet—especially because of Lil Pendleton's say-so."

"Now, look out!" shouted Lance. "All ready to go back, Chet?"

"Start her!" exclaimed his chum. "Cling tight, girls—and take a good breath. I want to time this trip. It's all of nine miles to the starting point and we'll show you——"

His voice trailed off and the girls did not hear the rest of his speech. The big propeller-wings began to beat the air, and the sound rose to a keen buzzing. Chet snapped his watch back into his pocket, raised his hand, and the ice-boat tore ahead.

In twenty seconds the wind rushed past them so that the girls were forced to bend their heads. The way was clear and Lance had "let her out." Chet bent sidewise watching the ice through his goggles. Occasionally he screamed an order to his chum, who signalled with his hand that he heard and understood.

It was like the flight of a meteor! Laura and Jess never had realized before what it meant to travel fast. Motoring on land was nothing like this. As though shot out of some huge cannon the aero-iceboat skimmed the lake. The wind was almost in their faces, but that made little difference to this new invention of the chums.

The other yachts had to tack against the wind; not so the aero-iceboat. Swift and straight she flew and suddenly Chet roared to Lance to shut down, and the propeller groaningly stopped.

Chet flung up his goggles and drew out his watch.

"Eight and a half minutes!" he cried, with glee. "And, as I told you, it's a good nine miles."

"Let me off! let me off!" gasped his sister, struggling down from the narrow body of the boat. "Why! I never want to travel any faster, Chet. Do you think it is *safe?*"

"You bet it is, Miss Laura," said Lance. "Or we wouldn't have invited you girls to go with us."

"Just wait till some day—say Saturday. By daylight I'd drive this thing faster than that. I tell you, we've got the speediest craft on the whole lake."

"It beats what Mrs. Case told us about ski

running in Sweden," cried Jess, who was delighted with the experience. "And if Mrs. Case starts a class to travel on skis this winter, I want to be in it."

"Well! it's all right to hear about. But the experience is sort of shaking," sighed Laura. "I'm not sure that I have an over-abundance of pluck, after all."

CHAPTER XVI

"JUST LIKE A STORY BOOK"

THE Morses were completely settled in their little house before school opened. Jess had had a busy vacation, but aside from her ride on Chet's and Lance's *Blue Streak* she had joined in little of the holiday fun of her mates at Central High.

There was one basketball game during the holiday recess. Central High met the Keyport team on their own court and outplayed them most decidedly; therefore the athletic temperature went up several degrees.

Mrs. Case, the physical instructor of Central High, was an enthusiastic out-of-doors woman, and as a heavy snow fell about New Year's she easily interested the girls under her instruction in skiing. This exercise, she pointed out, might take the place of the fortnightly walking expeditions during the snowy weather, and there was so much broken country behind Centerport that the sport could be indulged in with profit.

The boys were getting so much sport out of

ice hockey that—as the league approved of that form of exercise—the physical instructor introduced it on the girls' athletic field. The field could be flooded, and had been; now it was a perfectly smooth piece of ice and upon it those of the older girls who were already good skaters, had a chance to learn the mysteries of hockey.

"Huh! Father Tom says it's nothing but old-fashioned 'shinny' with a fancy name tacked onto it," declared Bobby Hargrew. "But my! isn't it fun?"

Jess and her chum, as well as the irrepressible, "took" to hockey, and there were enough of the other girls interested for two good teams to be made up.

Hester Grimes captained one team and Laura the other. There was still some little feeling of rivalry between Hester and Mother Wit—perhaps not much on the side of the latter; but the wholesale butcher's daughter was inclined to be overbearing, and was never really satisfied unless she had an important part in whatever went on.

The struggle between the two teams for supremacy among the girls of Central High in this particular sport really led, however, to good results. Hester was backed by strong players; and being so muscular a girl herself she carried her side to victory two out of every three times.

"We ought to beat her—she'll get too uppity to live with," declared Bobby, discussing these games.

"It will do us good to be beaten occasionally," laughed Laura. "You begin to think, Bobby, that you must belong to the winning side all the time."

"Yes. Who doesn't?" sniffed Miss Hargrew. "It's all right—all this talk about playing the game for the game's sake; but right down in the bottom of our hearts, don't all of us play to win? If we don't, we never play well, that's as sure as shooting."

When the school re-opened, however, on the first Monday in January, the subject uppermost in the minds of the girls of Central High was the prize contest in play-writing for the M. O. R's. The girls crowded into Assembly that morning, all on the *qui vive* to hear what the principal would have to say.

But after the opening exercises, when Mr. Sharp came forward to speak, he surprised everybody by saying:

"We are not ready to report upon the matter of the plays. Mr. Monterey will confer with us at noon, and before school is dismissed to-day we will announce the winner.

"It is not often that a committe having in

charge the decision of the winner in an amateur play-writing competition has the happiness to be aided by a professional manager of a theater, and a man, too, who has produced plays of importance himself.

"Mr. Monterey's knowledge of what will *act* well will make our final decision, I believe, one that will strike all competitors as eminently fair. We have tried to decide upon the prize winner in a way that will satisfy the giver of the prize, too—Mrs. Kerrick. She demanded a play that would act well and that will draw an audience because of its dramatic value as a play—not merely because it is written by a girl of Central High, or is performed by the girls and their friends for the benefit of the M. O. R's.

"Before the day closes, I can promise you, the decision will be made and the name of the prize-winner, and of the title of the play, will be announced. You are excused to your lessons for the morning."

The buzz of excitement—especially from the girls' side—when Mr. Sharp had ceased speaking, could scarcely be controlled. Not even Miss Carrington's basilisk eye could quell it.

Of course, poor Bobby fell a victim to Gee Gee's sour temper. She thought the teacher had long since reached the class room, and she was

gabbling away to Nell Agnew and Jess "sixteen to the dozen," as she would have said herself. When out of a door popped the bespectacled Miss Carrington, grimmer and more stern than usual.

"Indeed, Miss! are you supposed to rattle away like that about matters entirely foreign to your lessons, on the way to class room?" demanded the teacher.

"Oh, indeed, Miss Carrington," exclaimed the contrite Bobby (she always *was* contrite when caught in a fault, for all her sauciness and lightness arose from thoughtlessness) "I really forgot—I did not mean to make a noise in the corridor."

"Humph! did not mean—did not mean? What excuse is *that,* pray?"

"Not a very good one, I am afraid," admitted Bobby. "But I truly did not intend to break a rule. We were all so much interested in the play——"

"Yes. Quite so. It is evident that I will get little out of you young ladies until the matter of this silly play is settled. I presume you are one of the contestants, Miss Clara?"

"Not at all, Miss Carrington," said Bobby, demurely. "I *did* start to write one. It—it would have been a tragedy based upon several

of the main incidents in the Punic Wars. But I found that to give the matter proper attention I should be obliged to neglect some of the studies, and——"

"That will do, Miss Hargrew," interposed the teacher, severely. "You bring me on Friday afternoon a resume of those same Punic Wars—say a thousand words. I shall learn thereby just how much you know about the subject you selected for your play."

Perhaps Bobby deserved what she got; but she "pulled a dreadfully long face" about it, while the other girls were inclined to enjoy her chagrin.

As for Jess Morse, it seemed to her that the waiting for the announcement of the prize-winner was too hard a cross to bear. So much depended upon the decision of the committee—it did seem as though she could not keep her mind upon the lessons.

If she won—*if she won!*—there would be plain sailing in the domestic waters of the Morses' life—and that had come to mean a great deal to the girl. For even Mrs. Prentice's kindness to them had not cleared away all the troubles for Jess Morse.

True, the account at Mr. Closewick's had been paid. Jess, too, had seen to it that the month's

rent for their new home was met and a little something paid each week on the running store accounts.

But when Mrs. Morse drew her salary for the last week from the *Courier*—and it amounted to nearly ten dollars that week—she had been obliged to pay the money over to her dressmaker. She had found it necessary to order a new costume, if she was to follow the fashionable receptions, and the like, on the Hill. This matter of her mother being a society reporter, Jess, feared, would cost them more in the end than it was worth to them.

And now they began the New Year with positively nothing in the family purse. And there was so much needed. There would be another reception at the M. O. R. house this very week and Jess told herself that she could not go because of her lack of a gown. Ah! these things were all veritable tragedies to her.

Lily Pendleton was very sure that she was going to take the prize. And she was not afraid to talk about it.

"Mother saw Mr. Monterey, and I am sure he was impressed by what she told him," she announced. "Why, when the New Century Club met at our house last week, I read two acts of my play, and all the ladies said it was fine."

"Aren't you modest!" grumbled Bobby. "I should think it would pain you."

"Now, don't you get saucy, Bobby," warned Lily. "*You* are not interested in this contest, that's sure."

"Huh!" cried Bobby. "I knew better than to try to write any such thing. If I won the prize nobody would believe that I wrote it."

"Oh, Bob," said Dora Lockwood. "You are *too* modest."

"Yes, sir—ree!" returned Bobby. "I know it. I am of the same modest and withdrawing nature as the turtle."

"The turtle?"

"Yep," said Bobby. "You know what the little boy said when he first went into the country? He came running to his father and says: 'Oh, Dad! what's this thing I found? When I poked it, it put its hands and feet in its pockets and swallowed its head!' Now, there can't be anything much more retiring than the turtle—or *me*."

The bell called them in for the final session then, and half an hour before closing time the signal from Mr. Sharp's office announced that the girls of all classes were to file to the Assembly hall and take their seats. On this occasion the boys were not present.

"If I don't get it I hope you do, Jess," whispered Laura Belding to her chum as they went to their seats.

But to herself Jess kept saying: "Oh, it would be too good to be true—too good to be true! It would be just like a story-book."

Mr. Sharp was smiling when he rose to speak.

"I must admit that I am surprised—happily surprised," he began. "Several of the plays submitted to the committee are really marked by a vigor of style and originality of text and plot that have delighted me. Particularly are 'The Strong Defense,' by Miss Belding, 'Appearances,' by Miss Hilyard, 'The Arrow's Flight,' by Miss Agnew and 'Harrowdale,' by Miss Buford to be praised upon these points.

"Of course, there were some handed in to the committee that were utterly unintelligible; the writers had not grasped the first principles of play-writing. But, as a whole, I am proud of your efforts, and I know Miss Gould is. I only fear that many of you young ladies who began plays did not finish them. It narrowed the choice down to a very few.

"And yet," pursued Mr. Sharp, "there was really little doubt in the minds of any of the committee at the first reading of the manuscripts. And when the plays considered, from a literary

standpoint, really acceptable, were put in the hands of Mr. Monterey for a final reading and judgment, we were assured that our opinion was correct.

"There is but one, among them all, that is a really *actable* (pardon the coining of the word), and that one, too, has in it the elements of a really heart-moving story. The author has failed in many of the professional rules of play-writing —even her grammar is somewhat shaky in spots," added Mr. Sharp, smiling suddenly. "But the story is so sweet and so moving, and is so well fitted to the acting capacity of you girls and your brothers, that there is not the shadow of a doubt as to the worth of the piece and the success of the writer."

For a moment he was silent. The girls were eager. Lily Pendleton preened herself in her seat. Her play had not been named when the principal gave lukewarm praise to those mentioned. She was sure that he now referred to her and to her play.

On the other hand, Jess Morse had lost all hope. Her poor little play was not even mentioned, as Chet would have said, "among the also rans!"

"I am glad to announce—and to congratulate the young lady at the same time," said Mr. Sharp,

" that Miss Josephine Morse is the winner of the two hundred dollars offered by Mrs. Kerrick, the title of her play being 'The Spring Road.' "

It came like a thunderbolt! Jess could only gasp and stare up at him until his smiling, rosy face, and the big spectacles, were blurred in a mist that seemed to rise before her like a curtain.

Bobby Hargrew started the cheering; but it was Laura who reached Jess first and hugged her *tight.*

"I'm just as disappointed as I can be!" she cried. "I actually thought *my* play was going to be best. But as it wasn't—— Why, Jess, I'm almost as happy over your winning it as you can be yourself!"

CHAPTER XVII

LILY PENDLETON IS DISSATISFIED

"I consider it a very unfair decision—unfair in every particular," proclaimed Lily Pendleton, after school. "Why, he did not even *mention* 'The Duchess of Dawnleigh.' I can't believe that Mr. Monterey even *saw* my play. I certainly shall make inquiries."

Bobby Hargrew was caustic. "'The Duchess of Dawnleigh!'" she repeated. "Say Lil! would you really know a live duchess if you saw one coming up the street? Why didn't you write about something you knew about?"

"I guess I know as much about duchesses as *you* do, Bobby Hargrew!"

"I hope so," granted Bobby, cheerily. "If I had to go up against a duchess—a real, live one—I expect I'd be like the little milliner in Boston, when some great, high-and-mighty personages came there from England. One of them was a sure-enough duchess, and she sent for the little milliner to do some work for her.

"The little workwoman was just about scared into a conniption," chuckled Bobby, "when she found she had to go to the grand hotel to meet the grand lady and so asked a friend who knew a little more about the nobility than *she* did, what she should do when she entered the grand lady's presence.

"'Why, when you enter the room,' explained the friend, 'merely bow, and in speaking to her say "Your Grace."'"

"The little milliner," continued Bobby, "thought she could do that all right, and she went to the interview with the duchess without any dress rehearsal. When she got inside the lady's door she bowed very low and says, right off:

"'For what we are about to receive, Oh, Lord, make us truly grateful!'"

But while there may have been some disappointment in the hearts of some of the girls of Central High who had striven for the prize, they not yet having heard Jess Morse's play read, even the disappointed ones were not niggardly with their congratulations.

Jess walked in a maze that afternoon when she went home, Laura on one side and Nell Agnew on the other, while Bobby pirouetted around them like a very brilliant and revolving planet.

"And is there a part in your play for *me?*" demanded the irrepressible. "I just dote on actin. But no thinking part for mine, young lady! I must at least be important enough in the play to say: 'Me Lord! the carriage waits.'"

"You could play the part of *Puck* or *Ariel,* Bobby," declared Nellie Agnew.

"Hah! did you use those characters in 'The Arrow's Flight'?" gibed Bobby. "No wonder it was turned down then. Stealing boldly from Shakespeare!"

"No, I didn't, Miss!" returned Nell, rather sharply. "I hope you noticed that I was one of those who was 'honorably mentioned.'"

"Sure. Mr. Sharp let you all down easy," chortled Bobby.

"I believe the decision in the contest was eminently fair," declared Laura. "Yet I thought I would surely win."

"So did I," cried Nell.

"And I didn't even dare *hope* for it," said Jess, awe-stricken. "It's just the most wonderful thing that ever happened."

But Mrs. Morse took the success of "The Spring Road" quite as a matter of course.

"There, Josephine!" she exclaimed. "Now you can have the new clothes you are really suffering for——"

Jess decided that the argument might as well come right then. So she halted her mother on the verge of her plans for renewing the girl's wardrobe in a style more befitting the means of Lily Pendleton's mother, than her own!

"We have got to pay our debts," declared the girl, warmly. "Every penny must be paid, Mother, dear. Let's be free of bills and duns for once, at least. Let us start square with the world—and stay square if we can."

Mrs. Morse did not wish her daughter to use the prize money for their general needs. Jess had much trouble to convince her that it would make her, Jess, far happier to do that than to own the finest set of furs, or the most beautiful evening gown, that would be displayed upon the Hill that winter.

She did agree, finally, however, to have a new dress so that she could attend the M. O. R. reception that week, at which her play was read aloud by Miss Gould herself, and it was praised by the audience until Jess's ears fairly burned. Then the committee properly appointed went into executive session and plans for the production of "The Spring Road" went with a rush.

It was easy to choose a cast of characters. With a little advice from Jess it was not hard to select the very girls and boys best fitted to act

in the piece. And such selection was made that very week, the typewritten 'sides' distributed to the several players, and the boys and girls went to work to memorize their parts. Lance Darby and Chet Belding were both in the play, and although neither Laura, nor Jess herself, had a part, they were both so busy (for they were on the M. O. R. play committee) that for a few days athletics and sports were well-nigh neglected.

Through the good-natured manager of the Centerport Opera House, scenery and much of the properties and some costumes for the inferior characters were to be obtained. But the principal characters would furnish their own costumes, and that is where Lily Pendleton began to lose her dissatisfaction. Disappointed as she had been regarding the decision of the committee, when she found that she was cast for an important part in Jess's play she "came out of the sulks," as Bobby termed it.

Mr. Monterey suggested to the committee, too, the name of a man to take charge of the rehearsals—really, to be stage director of "The Spring Road." He came to the M. O. R. house one afternoon to read the play—a dapper, foreign-looking man of an indeterminate age, who continually twirled a silken black mustache and

listened devotedly to any girl who talked to him.

Lily began to cultivate Mr. Pizotti assiduously. Really, one might have supposed *she* had written the play, instead of Jess Morse, she was so frequently in conference with Mr. Pizotti that first afternoon.

Bobby, who had likewise been cast for a part in "The Spring Road," watched Lily's actions with the stage manager with a good deal of disgust.

"What do you know about that foolish girl?" she demanded. "I'll wager that greasy foreigner has got a wife and ten children—and neglects them. He has brilliantine on that moustache, and he smells of hair-oil, and I'll wager, too his hair will show gray at the roots, and I *know* it is thin on top."

"How wise you are, Miss Bobby," said Nellie, who heard her. "For a child you seem to have learned a lot."

"I'm foxy," returned Bobby, grinning impishly. "I'm fully as smart as that kid brother of Alice Long's. He came up to see us the other day—Alice brought him. Aunt Mary is real old fashioned, you know, and she sat in the kitchen darning and Tommy was playing around the floor. She thought it was getting toward tea time and she said to him:

"'Tommy, go into the front hall and see if the clock is running, that's a good boy.'

"Tommy came back after a minute, and says:

"'No, ma'am, it ain't running; it's standing still. But it's wagging it's tail!'"

"And there's Lil putting on her hat in a hurry so as to meet the man when Miss Gould is through with him, and walk down the block—— Did you ever?" exclaimed Jess.

"Poor Pretty Sweet!" groaned Bobby. "*His* nose is out of joint. He has been Lil's bright and shining cavalier for months. Dear, dear me! The Duchess of Dusenberry—was *that* the name of Lil's play?—sure does have her favorites, and like the *Queen of Hearts* in "Alice in Wonderland," has only one command for her discarded courtiers: 'Off with their heads!'" and Bobby giggled as she peered from the window to watch the dapper Mr. Pizotti and Lily Pendleton walk down the street side by side.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SKI RUNNERS

The New Year had ushered in the first big fall of snow—and it kept coming. Every few days, for the following fortnight, snow fell until Centerport's street-cleaning department was swamped, and the drifts lay deep upon the vacant lots and against fences and blind walls.

Skating was done for, for the ice on the lake had become overloaded, and had broken up into a shifting mass of blocks, grinding against each other when the wind blew, and threatening the safety of any craft that tried to put out in it.

So traffic on Lake Luna ceased, and, of course, ice-boating was likewise impossible. Chet and Lance Darby, had they not been so extremely busy learning their parts in the new play, could not have used their aero-iceboat during this time. Sleds were out in force, however—bobsleds, double-runners, toboggans, " framers," and every sort of coasting paraphernalia. Even the Whiffle Street hill was made a coasting place by the

young folk of the neighborhood, much to the despair of some grouty people who had forgotten their own youth, and who either telephoned their complaints to the police, or sprinkled ashes on the slide in the early morning hours.

It was at this time, however, that Mrs. Case, the girls' physical instructor of Central High, took her class in ski running out into the open.

At first the dozen or more girls had practiced on their athletic field, which was now snow-covered, too. It was a particularly odd experience to stand upon narrow boards of ash, some ten feet in length, and then try to shuffle along on them without tipping sideways, or plunging head-first into a drift.

Each ski runner held a pole, with a spike in one end, and this was an aid to balancing, as well as of additional use if one tumbled down. It was no easy task, the girls found, to get up when they had been thrown into a drift.

"My!" commented Bobby Hargrew, "if you cross your feet going down hill on these things, you're likely to dislocate every joint in your body."

"Be sure you do not cross your feet, then," advised Mrs. Case, grimly. "I have shown you all the correct position to stand upon these skis. The professional ski runner does not even use a

pole. He will take the steep sides of mountains at a two-mile a minute rate. I have seen them do so in Switzerland and in Sweden and Norway. And they will jump into the air from the verge of high banks, and land on the drift at the bottom with perfect balance."

"This is going to be no cinch to learn," pronounced Bobby. "I know it's going to be some time before I am good enough at it to jump off the top of Boulder Head on Cavern Island—now you see!"

"You would better take a much less difficult jump first," advised Mrs. Case, smiling. "It will be enough fun for us to learn to travel on the skis without any frills. In Europe—especially on the road between St. Moritz and Celerina—I have often seen ski riders with horses. A horse trots ahead, drawing several riders on skis, who cling together by the aid of a rope fastened to the horse's collar. Sometimes each rider has a horse, and they race horses just as though they were riding in sleighs.

"It is great sport, but like every other healthful form of athletics, it is often made dangerous and objectionable by those who are reckless, or rough. We will learn to balance ourselves, and to coast down a gentle descent."

So, the next Saturday, the teacher and more

than a dozen girls of Central High piled into a big, straw-filled sleigh, and were whisked out into the hills south of the city. The inn at Robinson's Woods—a popular picnicking ground in summer—was made their headquarters, and there they left the sleigh and took to the difficult skis.

The climb to the top of the bluff overlooking the speedway, on which everybody—almost—who owned a sleigh was driving that afternoon, was not an easy one for the girls. Mrs. Case, holding her body erect, yet easily, shuffled up the incline with such little apparent effort that some of her pupils were in despair.

"We'll never be able to run as you do, Mrs. Case!" cried Dora Lockwood. "Never! Why —ouch! There, I came near tumbling down that time."

"Keep your balance. Use the pole if you have to," advised the instructor. "It is not a running motion—it is more like a slide."

"Say!" growled Bobby, who was having trouble, too. "It beats the 'debutante slink,' that came in with narrow skirts. I feel as if I was tumbling down every second."

But they gained confidence in time. They reached the top of the bluff and then the long, easy slope, right beside the speedway, spread,

spotless, before them. Mrs. Case showed them how to start, and after a fashion several of the bigger girls reached the bottom of the hill, and then panted up again, pronouncing it the best ever!

Bobby would not be outdone, as she said, "by anything in skirts," and so she ventured. Halfway down the hill one of her skis must have struck something—perhaps the stub of a bush sticking out of the snow. Whew! Bobby turned almost a complete somersault!

She was buried so deep in a drift—and head first, at that—that it took both Laura and Mrs. Case to pull her out.

"Oh-me-oh-my!" cried Bobby, who looked like an animated snow-girl for the moment. "And just as I was getting on so well, too! Wasn't that mean?"

"Perhaps you'd better not try any more today, Clara," said the instructor.

"And let those other girls get ahead of me? Well! I guess not!" declared Miss Hargrew, and she ploughed back to the top of the hill, fastened her feet upon the skis again, and started once more.

Laura and Jess Morse were on the hilltop, looking out upon the white track over which the sleighs were flying.

"Look there!" gasped Jess, seizing her chum's arm. "Isn't that the Pendletons' sleigh?"

"Of course it is. With the big plumes and the pair of dappled grays? And that stiff and starched coachman driving? No mistake," admitted Laura.

"Who's in the sleigh with Lil?" demanded Jess.

"As I live!" cried her chum, in a somewhat horrified tone. "It—it is that Pizotti—that man!"

"Can you beat her?" said Jess, shaking her head.

"How foolish!" added Laura. "He is not a good man. He has known her so short a time—and to go sleigh-riding with her. Lil will be talked about, sure enough."

"Well, I don't know as *we* need to worry about her," said Jess, shrugging her shoulders.

But Laura Belding could not put her schoolmate's indiscreet actions out of her mind so easily. She wondered if Mrs. Pendleton knew of Lily's familiarity with the foreign-looking Pizotti. The man might know his business as a stage director; but he certainly was neither of the age, nor the condition in life, to be cultivated as a friend by any young girl.

Lily Pendleton was so foolishly romantic, and

so crazy about theatrical matters, that to be noticed by any person connected with the stage, or theatrical affairs, quite turned her head. And then, she still talked a great deal about her own play, "The Duchess of Dawnleigh." She was sure it had not been given a proper reading—especially by Mr. Monterey. Perhaps, for reasons best known to himself, this stranger, Mr. Pizotti, had promised the foolish girl that he would help her get "The Duchess of Dawnleigh" produced.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIRST DRESS REHEARSAL

LAURA BELDING was a particularly frank, outspoken girl, and when she met Lily Pendleton that Saturday night at the rehearsal of Jess's play, she came out "flat-footed," as her chum would have said, with the question:

"Who was that in the sleigh with you to-day, Lil?"

Lily flushed instantly, bridled, and smiled. "Who do you s'pose?" she returned.

"I don't believe your mother knew you had that theatrical man to drive with you," said Laura, bluntly.

"Why, how you talk! I merely met Signor Pizotti, and took him up——"

"You don't know who he is," spoke Laura.

"Oh, indeed, Miss! And do *you?*" demanded Lily, rather sharply.

"No And I don't want to know him."

"He is a very scholarly man—and he knows

all about staging this play. If it wasn't for him, I guess, 'The Spring Road' would suffer from frost," said Lily, with an unkind laugh.

"That may be," said Laura, flushing a little herself, for any slur cast upon her chum's play hurt her, too. "But his knowledge of how to produce or stage a play does not establish his private character."

"Pooh! you are interfering in something that you know nothing about," declared Miss Pendleton, loftily. "And it does not concern you at all."

"I do not believe your mother would approve," ventured Laura.

"Never you mind about my mother," snapped Lily, and turned her back on Mother Wit.

The latter took herself to task later, thinking she had been too presumptuous.

"But really," she said to Jess, on their way home that evening, "I did not mean to be. Only, the man looks so unreliable. I'm afraid of him."

"I'm not afraid of him," said Jess, decidedly. "I only dislike him. But there is no accounting for tastes. My mother knew of a foolish girl who wrote to an opera tenor—one of those handsome, spoiled foreigners, and she sent him her photograph and told him how much she liked his singing—and all that. Just a silly letter, you

know. But she didn't sign her name and she thought he would never learn who she was.

"But he went to the photographer," continued Jess, "and bribed him to tell who the girl was, and by that time she had written to the man several times, and he had written to her. So then he threatened her that if she did not give him five hundred dollars he would send her letters to her father. And she was in dreadful trouble, for she was afraid of what her father would do."

"Oh, Lil won't do anything like *that!*" gasped Laura. "I don't believe she even thinks she *cares* about that Pizotti. It is only his foreign way that makes it appear so. But I believe he is flattering her about her play, and perhaps will get money from her or her mother."

"Pizotti! Ha!" grunted Jess, before they separated. "I'm like Bobby Hargrew: I don't believe that's even his name. It sounds too fancy to be a *real* name."

But Mr. Pizotti was an able man in his business. He came from time to time to the M. O. R. house and his advice regarding the play was always practical. He was something of a musician, too, and played the accompaniments for the girls who sang in "The Spring Road." He suggested improvements in the costumes, too; and

Lily Pendleton was entirely guided by his taste in her choice of the gowns she was to wear in the production.

Mrs. Pendleton was a very busy woman in a social way and allowed her daughter to do about as she pleased. Lily aped the manners of girls who had long since graduated from school and were flashy in their dress and manners.

To tell the truth, the after-hour athletics, governed by Mrs. Case, had been the one saving thing in Lily Pendleton's life for some months. She would have become so enamored of fashion and frivolity, had it not been for the call of athletics, that she would have fallen sadly behind in her school work.

But she liked certain activities enjoyed by those who were attentive to Mrs. Case's classes; and to gain these privileges one had to stand well in her general studies. Lily was smart enough, was a quick student, and so kept up her school work.

This business of acting appealed to her immensely. She was "just crazy about it," as she admitted to her particular friend, Hester Grimes.

"I wish my folks were poor, so that I would have to work when I leave school," she declared. "Then I'd go on the stage myself."

"You wouldn't!" exclaimed Hester.

"I would in a minute. And this Signor Pizotti could place me very advantageously——"

"Pooh! you don't believe anything that fellow says, do you?" demanded her chum, who was eminently practical and had none of the silly ideas in her head that troubled Lily.

"You don't know him!" exclaimed Lily.

"Don't want to," replied Hester, gruffly.

Preparations for the first dress rehearsal of "The Spring Road" went on apace. But, of course, Bobby Hargrew *would* have bad luck! She was thrown from Short and Long's bobsled one night and had to be helped home. The hurt to her foot was a small matter; but the doctor said she would have to wear her arm in a sling for a time.

"And how can I play *Arista* with my arm strapped to my side?" wailed Bobby, when Jess and Laura came in to commiserate with her over the accident. "Oh, dear me! I am the most unlucky person in the world. If it was raining soup I'd have a hole in *my* dipper!"

Mr. Monterey, the local manager, came himself to the dress rehearsal. He only sat out front, and watched and listened; and he went away without expressing an opinion to anybody. Yet Jess saw him there and was excited by the

possibility of Mr. Monterey's recognizing the value of the play for professional purposes.

At the Morse domicile things were going better, and the girl's mind was vastly relieved from present troubles. Yet she was wise enough to see that in the offing the same danger of debt threatened them if they were not very, very careful.

It was true that scarcely half the prize money had been spent; yet Mrs. Morse's regular work on the *Courier* barely fed them; and her success with the popular magazines was but fitful. Sometimes two months passed without her mother receiving even a ten-dollar check from her fugitive work.

Oh, if she could only find somebody who would take the play—after the M. O. R.'s had made use of it—and whip it into shape for professional use, and give her a part of the proceeds!

That was the thought continually knocking at the door of Jess Morse's mind. It was "too good to be true," yet she kept thinking about it, and hoping for the impossible, and dreaming of it.

However, the dress rehearsal of "The Spring Road" was pronounced by the teachers and Mr. Pizotti as eminently satisfactory. Bobby was

letter-perfect in her part, if she *did* have "a damaged wing," as she said. And most of the other important roles were well learned.

The very prettiest girl of Central High had been chosen for the chief female character, and in this case prettiness went with brains. She had learned her part, and was natural and graceful, and was altogether a delight.

As for Launcelot Darby, he was the most romantic looking *Truant Lover* that could have been found. And he played with feeling, too, although his mates were making a whole lot of fun of him on the side. But Laura had urged him to do his best, and Lance would have done anything in his power to please Mother Wit.

Chet Belding, as a peasant, "made up" well, and was letter perfect, too, in his part, if a little awkward. But that did not so much matter, considering the character he had to portray. And, of course, he would do nothing to belittle Jess's play. His whole heart was in his work, too.

So, after that first dress rehearsal, the committee and Jess were hopeful of success. The time for the production of the play was set, the tickets printed, and out of school hours everything was in a bustle of preparation for the great occasion.

CHAPTER XX

"MR. PIZOTTI"

"LISTEN to this!"

Bobby Hargrew, her arm still in a sling, seized Jess Morse by the wrist and "tiptoed" along the corridor of the second wing of Central High, where the small offices were located, and with tragic expression pointed to a certain door that stood ajar.

Jess, amazed, did not speak, but listened. Out of the room came a muffled voice, but the words spoken were these:

"Unhand me! Nay, keep your distance, Count Mornay! I am no peasant wench to be charmed either by your gay coat or your gay manner. Ah! your villainies are known to me, nor can you hide the cloven hoof beneath the edge of Virtue's robe."

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Bobby, almost strangling with laughter. "He ought to have worn boots and so hidden his 'cloven hoof.' Come away, Jess, or I shall burst! Did you ever hear the like?"

"Why—why, what is it?" demanded Jess, mystified.

"Oh, don't! Wait till I laugh!" chuckled Bobby, when they were around the corner of the corridor again. "Isn't that rich?"

"Who was it talking?" asked Jess.

"Talking! Didn't you recognize that oration?"

"I did not. Mother doesn't allow me to read any penny-dreadful story papers, magazines or books."

"Oh, ho! Wait!" gasped Bobby. "That's Lil."

"Lily Pendleton?"

"You evidently haven't heard any of the 'Duchess of Dusenberry' before. *That's it!*"

"Not part of her play?"

"That is one of the melodramatic bits," said Bobby, weakly, leaning against the wall for support. "Yes, really, Jess. That is in her play. I've heard her recite it before."

"My goodness me!" gasped Jess.

"It's not *all* so bad, I guess. But when she gets flowery and romantic she just tears off such paragraphs as that. 'Nor can you hide the cloven hoof beneath the edge of Virtue's robe.' Isn't that a peach?"

"Bobby!" exclaimed Jess, breathless herself

by now, "you use the worst slang of any girl in Central High."

"That's all right. But Lil's using worse language than I ever dreamed of," laughed Bobby. "I've heard her spouting that sort of stuff time and time again. When she shuts herself up, presumably to study her part in your play, half the time she is reciting her own lines. She likes the sound of 'em. And she had that Pizotti fellow backed in a corner of the front hall at the M. O. R. house the other afternoon, reciting that same sort of stuff to him.

"Repeating her play?"

"Yep. The silly! And he pretending that it was great, and applauding her. I'll wager that he sees a way to make money out of Lil Pendleton, or he wouldn't stand for it."

Jess carried this idea in her mind, although she was not as much troubled by her schoolmate's foolishness as was Mother Wit. There was a loyalty among the girls of Central High, however, that few ignored. Despite the fact that Jess had never especially liked Lily Pendleton, she would have done anything in her power to help her.

So, that very evening, when she was marketing, she chanced to see something that brought Lil's affairs into her mind again. She was going

into Mr. Vandergriff's store when she saw a man, bundled in a big ulster, talking with the proprietor.

Griff came forward to wait on Jess, and the girl might not have noticed the man by the desk a second time had she not overheard Mr. Vandergriff say:

"You take advantage of my good nature, Abel. Because I knew you in the old country, you come here and plead poverty. I can't see your family suffer, for your wife is a nice woman, if you *are* a rascal!"

"Hard words! Hard words, Vandergriff," muttered the other.

Jess saw that he was a little man, and the high ulster collar muffled the lower part of his face. But as he turned toward the door she caught a glimpse of a glossy black mustache, and two beady black eyes.

It was Mr. Pizotti!

The girl was so astonished, for the man was shabbily dressed, and shuffled out with several bundles under his arm, that she could scarcely remember what else she wanted to buy when Griff asked her.

"Oh, I say, Griff!" she demanded, breathlessly, and in a whisper. "Who was that man who just went out?"

"Why—oh, that was only Abel Plornish."

"Abel Plornish!"

"Yep. Poor, useless creature," said the boy, with disgust. "Or, so father says. He knew Abel in England. You know, father came from London before he was married," and Griff smiled.

"But this man—are you sure his name is Plornish?"

"Quite, Jess. Why, he plays the violin, or the piano, in some cheap moving picture place, I believe."

"Then he is a musician?" demanded Jess, breathlessly.

"And a bad one, I reckon. But he has done other things. He's been on the stage. And he's even worked in the Centerport Opera House, I believe."

"And that is really his name?" asked Jess.

"It's an awful one, isn't it? Plornish! Nothing very romantic or fancy about that," laughed Griff. "Now, what else, Jess?"

Jess was so disturbed by this discovery that she could only think to ask Griff one more question. That related to where Plornish lived.

"Somewhere on Governor Street. I think it's Number 9. Tenement house. Oh, they're poor, and I believe when he gets any money he spends

it on himself. I saw him once on Market Street dressed like a dandy. But when his wife and children come in here they look pretty shabby."

It wasn't very late ,and, anyway, Jess couldn't have slept that night without talking the matter over with Mother Wit. She left her basket in the kitchen, saw that her mother was busy at her desk, and ran up Whiffle Street hill to the Belding house.

"Is dat suah yo', Miss Jess?" asked Mammy Jinny, peering out of the side door when Jess rang the bell. "Come right erlong in, honey. Yo's jes' as welcome as de flowers in de Maytime. B-r-r! ain't it cold?"

"It is cold, Mammy," said Jess to the Beldings' old serving woman. "Where's Laura?"

"She's done gone up to her room ter listen ter Mars' Chet an' dat Lance Darby boy orate dem pieces dey is goin' to recite in school nex' week."

"They are going to act in my play, Mammy!" cried Jess.

"Mebbe so. Mebbe so. But it's all recitationin' ter me. Dat leetle Bobby Hargrew was in here and she say it's jes' like w'en you-all useter recite at de Sunday night concerts in de Sunday school room. An' dem pieces yo' orated den was a hull lot nicer dan w'at Mars' Chet is sayin'. 'Member how you recited dat 'Leetle

drops o' water, leetle grains o' sand piece, Miss Jess? Dat was suah a nice piece o' po'try."

"And you don't care for the parts you have heard of my play, Mammy?" asked Jess, much amused.

"Suah 'nuff, now! Did you make up disher play dey is goin' ter act?" demanded Mammy Jinny.

"I certainly did."

"Wal, I hates ter hu't yo' feelin's, Miss Jess," said Mammy, gravely, "but dat 'Leetle drops o' water' po'try was a hull lot better—ter *my* min'! Ya'as'm! yo kin' go right up. Yo'll hear dem-all a-spoutin'—spoutin' jes' like whales!"

And so she did. Chet was reading his lines with much unction while striding up and down Laura's pretty little room. Lance and Mother Wit were his audience.

"For goodness sake, Chet!" cried Jess, breaking in. "Who told you your part was tragic, and that 'The Spring Road' was tragedy?"

"Huh?" questioned Chet, stopping short and blinking at her.

"Do read the lines naturally. Don't be 'orating,' as Mammy Jinny calls it. I guess she's right. 'Little drops of water' is better than all

that bombastic stuff. Do, do, my dear, speak it naturally."

"Hear her!" growled Chet. "And she wrote it!"

"I never really meant it to sound like that, Chet," declared Jess, shaking her head. "I really didn't. Why! it sounds almost as bad as 'The Duchess of Dawnleigh.'"

"Wha—what's that?" demanded Lance.

"Not Lil's play?" cried Laura. "Have you heard it?'

Jess told what she had heard at the door of the recitation room that afternoon, and they laughed over it.

"Yet I can see very well," continued Jess, "that you actors can make my words sound just as absurd if you want to. Do, *do* be natural."

"That's what I tell them," sighed Laura. "I am glad you heard Chet spouting here. One would think he was playing 'Hamlet,' or 'Richard III.'"

Chet was a little miffed. But he soon "came out of it," as Lance said, and he was so fond of Jess anyway that he would have tried his best to please her.

He grew more moderate in his "orating" and the girls, as critics, were better pleased. Lance took a leaf out of his chum's book, too, and

when he declaimed his lines he succeeded in pleasing Jess and Laura the first time. Besides, Lance was naturally a better actor than Chet.

Mr. Pizotti had taught them how to enter properly, and how to take their cues; but to Jess's mind he was not the man to train amateurs to speak their parts with naturalness. If Miss Gould had not given so much time to the rehearsals of "The Spring Road" the play would have not been half the success it promised to be. And, of course, the Central High teacher gave her attention mainly to the girls in the cast of characters.

When Lance and Chet lounged off to the latter's den Jess instantly poured into Laura's ears her discovery of the identity of "Mr. Pizotti."

"Well, even at that he may be a man trying to earn his living. Many stage people change their names for business reasons. 'Plornish' is not an attractive name, you must admit," said Laura, smiling. "'Pizotti' fits his foreign look."

"But what is he trying to get out of Lil Pendleton?" demanded Jess, bluntly.

"That's what troubles me," admitted Mother Wit. "I believe he is trying to get money out of Lily, or from her folks. And it has to do

with Lil's play. You can see that she believes her play was slighted and that it is a great deal better than yours, Jess."

"I guess she has a good opinion of it," returned Jess, laughing.

"Well, suppose this fellow tells her she is right, and that he can get it produced, if she will put up the money?" suggested Mother Wit. "I—I wish Lil would place confidence in me."

"Tell her mother."

"No use," sighed Laura. "I doubt if she would even listen to me. She wouldn't want to be bothered. You know very well the kind of woman Mrs. Pendleton is."

"Well, I don't suppose it is any of our business, anyway," spoke Jess.

"It is. Lil is one of us—one of the girls of Central High. We have a deep interest in anything that concerns her. The only trouble is," sighed Laura, "I don't know just what is best to do."

CHAPTER XXI

MOTHER WIT PUTS TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

The snow still mantled the ground, and the coasting and ski running remained very popular sports with the girls and boys of Central High. But a day's hard rain, with a sharp frost after it, had given the ice-boating another lease of life, too. Lake Luna was a-glare from the mainland to Cavern Island, and the freight boats had given over running until the spring break-up.

Not that there were no open places in the ice—for there were, and dangerous holes, too. The current through the length of the lake was bound to make the ice weak in places. But near the Centerport shore was a long stretch of open ice that the authorities pronounced safe.

Chet and Lance got the *Blue Streak* out again and there wasn't a girl in the junior class who was not envious of Laura and Jess. Skating was tame beside traveling at a mile a minute in an aero-iceboat; and the other ice yachts were not in the same class with the invention of Chet and Lance.

The date set for the production of Jess's play in the big hall of the schoolhouse approached, however; and preparation for the event was neglected by none of the M. O. R.'s or the other girls and boys in the cast.

Friday evening would see the first production; but the intention was to give a matinee for the pupils of the three Centerport High Schools at a nominal price on Saturday morning, and then a final performance Saturday evening. From these three performances the committee hoped to gain at least a thousand dollars, and possibly half as much more. This would be a splendid addition to the somewhat slim building fund of the M. O. R.'s.

Lily Pendleton went about these days with a very self-satisfied expression of countenance and such a mysterious manner that Bobby said to her:

"Huh! you look like an old hen that's hidden her nest and thinks nobody's going to find it. What are you up to now?"

"Don't you wish you knew?" returned Lily.

Even Hester Grimes admitted that she was not in Lil's confidence. But the hints Lily dropped troubled Mother Wit.

Laura Belding had not forgotten the discovery her chum had made regarding the identity

of the man who called himself "Pizotti." The stage director would not again attend the performance of "The Spring Road" until the day of the first production. Yet Laura believed that Lily had an understanding of some sort with him.

Governor Street, where Griff told Jess the Plornish family lived, was one of the very poorest in that part of the city, being located at the foot of the Hill and below Market Street itself.

Laura and Jess went shopping one afternoon on Market Street; and despite the fact that it was nipping cold weather, and that the street was a mass of snow-ice, save on the car tracks, they walked home. The sidewalks were slippery, and it took some caution to keep one's feet; but the chums were so sure of their balance that they stepped along quite briskly.

From Mr. Vandergriff's store they saw a poorly dressed little girl—perhaps eight years old, or so—dragging a soap box on runners. The box had several packages of groceries in it, besides a bottle of milk.

Just as the child started across Market Street there came a heavy sleigh with plumes, great robes, a pair of dapple gray horses, and a great jingling of bells. The driver did not see the

little girl with her box until it was almost too late to pull out.

It all happened in a flash! The peril was upon the child before she or anybody else realized it; and it had passed her, only smashing her sled and spilling her goods, in another moment.

The sleigh, with the horses prancing, swept on and did not even stop for its occupants to note the damage it had done. The child was left crying in the gutter, with the groceries scattered about and the milk making a white river upon the dirty ice.

Laura sprang to aid the little one in picking up her goods; but Jess exclaimed:

"Did you see that, Laura?"

"I should think I did! And they never stopped."

"But did you see who was in the sleigh?"

"No."

"It was Lil—and that man was riding with her again."

"Pizotti?" gasped Laura.

"Yes. Here! give me that bottle. I'll run across and get another bottle of milk from Mr. Vandergriff. We'll have to help the little one carry her stuff home. The little sled is smashed to smithereens."

"All right, Jess. Now, don't cry, child!" ex-

claimed Mother Wit, kindly, hovering over the little girl. "You won't be blamed for this, I know."

But the child was staring after the sleigh instead of picking up her goods, and with such a wondering look on her face that Laura asked:

"What is the matter with you? What did you see?"

The child still remained dumb, and Laura took her by the shoulder and shook her a little.

"What is your name?" she demanded.

"Maggie," said the little one, gulping down a sob.

"Maggie what?"

"No, ma'am; Maggie Plornish," stammered the other.

"My goodness me!" gasped Laura. "Did you see the man in that sleigh?"

"No, ma'am! No ma'am!" cried the little girl, in great haste, and shaking her head violently. "There warn't no man in the sleigh."

"Yes there was, child."

"I didn't see no man," declared Maggie, energetically. "It was the lady I seen."

"Do you know her?" asked Laura, slowly, convinced that the child was deceiving her—or, at least, attempting to do so.

"No, ma'am. I never seed her before."

It was evidently useless to try to get anything more out of the child on that tack. But Laura was sure that there could not be two Plornish families in Centerport, and if Jess had seen the stage director in Lily Pendleton's sleigh, it was plain that Maggie had seen him, too. And she had recognized him.

"Where do you live, little girl?" asked Laura, quietly, as she saw Jess returning with a fresh bottle of milk.

"Over 'ere on Governor Street. Number ninety-three, Miss."

"Lead the way, then," said Laura, promptly. "We'll help you carry your things home and explain to mamma how you came to get them scattered. You surely have a mamma, haven't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. And there's a new baby. That's who the milk's for."

"Say! how many of you Plornish children are there?" asked Jess, to whom Laura had immediately whispered the intelligence that this child was evidently one of Mr. Pizotti's progeny.

"Seven, ma'am. But some's older'n me and they're workin'."

"Don't you go to school?" asked Laura.

"I can't—not right now. We ain't got good

shoes to go 'round—nor petticoats. And then, the baby didn't come along until a month ago and he has to be 'tended some while mamma washes and cleans up around."

Laura looked at Jess meaningly and asked:

"Where's your papa?"

"Oh! he's home," said the child, immediately losing her smart manner of speaking.

"Doesn't he work?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sometimes."

"What's his trade?" asked Jess.

"Huh?"

Maggie Plornish had suddenly become very dull indeed!

"Doesn't your father work regularly?" explained Laura, kindly. "Hasn't he any particular work?"

Maggie considered this thoughtfully. Then she shook her head and with gravity replied: "I guess he's an outa."

"A what?" gasped Jess.

"An outa, Miss."

"What under the sun's an 'outa'?" demanded Jess, looking at Laura.

But Mother Wit understood and smiled. "You mean he's 'most always out of work?" she asked.

Maggie Plornish nodded vigorously.

"Yes, ma'am! He's us'lly outa work. Most reg'larly. Yes, ma'am!"

"Well for mercy's sake!" gasped Jess, gazing at her chum in wonder. "Can you beat *that?* If this is the same family——"

Laura stayed her with a look. "We'll see," said Mother Wit. "Lead on, Maggie. We'll see your mother, anyway."

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. PLORNISH

GOVERNOR STREET was just as dirty and squalid as any other tenement-house street in the poorer section of a middle-class city. The street-cleaning department had given up all hope before they reached Governor Street, and the middle of the way was a series of ridges and mountains of heaped-up, dirty, frozen snow.

The snow had been cleaned from the sidewalks, and the gutters freed so that the melting ice could run off by way of the sewers when the sun was kind; but the way to Number 93 was not a pleasant one to travel.

However, Laura and Jess, with little Maggie, reached the door in question in a few minutes. A puff of steamy air—the essence of countless washings—met the girls as the lower door was pushed open. That is the only way the long and barren halls were heated—by the steam from the wash-boilers. For Number 93 Governor Street was one of those tenement houses which

seem always to be in a state of being washed, and laundered, and cleaned up; yet which never show many traces of cleanliness, after all.

"We live on the top floor," said Maggie, volunteering her first remark since starting homeward.

"That doesn't scare us," said Laura, cheerfully. "Lead on, MacDuff!"

"No. My name's Plornish," said this very literal—and seemingly dull—little girl.

"Very well, Maggie MacDuff Plornish!" laughed Mother Wit. "We follow you."

The little girl toiled up the stairs like an old woman. Laura and Jess caught glimpses of other tenements as they followed the child and saw that there was real poverty here. Jess began to compare her situation with that of these humble folk, and saw that she had much to be grateful for.

She was troubled over the lack of a new party dress, perhaps, or because there were times when she and her mother were pinched for money. But the bare floors and uncurtained windows of these "flats," with the poor furniture and raggedly clothed children, spelled a degree of poverty deeper than Jess Morse had imagined before.

A sallow woman met them at the door of one

of the top-floor flats. She was as faded as her calico dress. Her arms were lean and her hands wrinkled, and all the flesh about her finger nails was swollen and of a livid hue, from being so much in hot water.

Indeed, two steaming tubs stood in the kitchen into which the girls of Central High were ushered. A big wash was evidently under way, and Mrs. Plornish wiped her arms and hands from the suds, as she invited the girls in, staring in amazement at one and another meanwhile.

"Your little Maggie met with an accident, Mrs. Plornish," said Laura, pleasantly, putting the packages she had carried upon the table. "And so we helped her home with her groceries."

"And Mr. Vandergriff says never mind the bottle of milk that was spilled," explained Jess, setting the second bottle on the table.

"You come from Mr. Vandergriff?" asked the woman, her faded cheek coloring a trifle.

Laura explained more fully. Mrs. Plornish seemed to have had her motherly instincts pretty well quenched by time and poverty.

"Yes'm. I expect Maggie'll git runned over and killed some day on that there Market Street," she complained. "But I ain't got no-

body else to send. Bob and Betty, and Charlemagne, air either at school or to work——"

"Where is your husband?" asked Laura, briskly. "Is he working?"

"Off an' on," said the woman, but looking at the visitors a little doubtfully.

"Engaged just at present?" pursued Laura.

"Look here, Miss," said Mrs. Plornish, "air you charity visitors? Though you *be* young."

"We have nothing to do with charities," Laura said. "We just came to help Maggie. I didn't know but I might know of something for your husband to do if he is out of work."

"He ain't. He's got a job right now. And I guess it will turn out to be a good one," spoke Mrs. Plornish, and she smiled with sudden satisfaction.

"It seems to please you, Mrs. Plornish," said Jess, quickly. "I hope you will not be disappointed. Where is he working?"

"Oh, this job o' work is goin' to take him out o' town for a while," returned the woman, doubtfully.

"Indeed? To Lumberport?" asked the insistent Jess.

"No."

"To Keyport, then?"

"I can't tell you. It—it's a secret—that is,

it's sort of a private affair. Abel is a very smart man in his way—and this—er—this job will bring him considerable money, I expect. I hope we'll all be better off soon."

She seemed excited by the prospect of her husband's secret employment, yet she was doubtful, too. Laura and Jess looked at each other and they both came to the same conclusion. If Abel Plornish, alias "Mr. Pizotti," was scheming to get some money from the Pendletons, Mrs. Plornish knew at least a little something about it.

But Laura did not know how to get this information from the woman; nor did the girl believe that it was really right for her to do so. But Mother Wit thought it would do no harm to help the family if she could do so without offending. She drew forth her purse and looked gently at Mrs. Plornish.

"You won't mind if I give you something to spend on Maggie?" asked Mother Wit, in her most winning way. "Do let me help her, Mrs. Plornish! I really mean no offense."

"Why, you look an honest enough young lady," said the woman.

"Maggie says she needs shoes so that she can go to school. Don't you think you can spare her for at least a part of the time?"

"Mebbe I'd better, Miss. The truant officer's been around once," said Mrs. Plornish. "But the baby's so small——"

"If your husband is as successful as you think he'll be," interposed Jess, sharply, "you'll be able to afford to let her go, eh? Then you will not have to work so hard yourself."

"That's right, Miss!" cried Mrs. Plornish, briskly.

Laura put the money for Maggie's shoes into her hand. "I hope we may come and see Maggie again?" she said, pinching the thin cheek of the little girl, who had been staring at them all this time, without winking, and without a word.

"Sure you can, Miss! And thank you. Thank the young lady, Maggie," ordered Mrs. Plornish.

Maggie gave a funny, bobbing little courtesy as the older girls went out. Laura and Jess said nothing to each other until they reached the street. Then the latter declared:

"She knows something about it."

"About what?" asked Laura.

"Whatever it is that's going on. Whatever it is 'Pizotti' is doing."

"And we know he is staging your play for

the M. O. R.'s," said Laura, quietly. "That's all we *do* know at present."

"But there's something else."

"That we don't know. I wish we did."

"And he's going out of town!"

"Perhaps that is not so," returned Laura, thoughtfully. "Of course his wife knows that he works under an assumed name. That is no crime, of course——"

"But there's something odd about it all," cried Jess.

"All right. How are we going to find out? Lil won't tell us——"

"And it is her business—or her mother's," said Jess. "And that's a fact."

"She's one of us—she's a Central High girl," repeated Laura. "If we can save her from the result of her own awful folly, we should do so."

"Huh! And we don't know what she's to be saved from as yet!" cried Jess, which ended the discussion for the time being.

But that evening Bobby Hargrew hailed Jess in her father's store.

"Say, Eminent Author! what do you know about *this?*"

"About what, Bobby?" returned Jess.

Bobby was unfurling some sort of a folded

paper which she had drawn from that inexhaustible pocket of hers.

"See! it's a show bill. My cousin, Ed Pembroke, sent it to me from Keyport. He says the town is plastered with them. Does it remind you of anything?" and she began to read in a loud voice:

"'Coming! Coming! Coming! North Street Orpheum——' same date as your show here on Friday night, Jess."

"I see," said Jess, peering over her shoulder as Bobby unctuously read on:

"'High Class Entertainment for High Class People!' Ha! that's good," sniffed Bobby. "'The Lady of the Castle' played by a capable cast of professional Thespians, who will assist the Talented Young Amateur, GREBA PENDENNIS. Her portrayal of the *Duchess* is a Work of Art.' Wow, wow! Listen to that now!" cried Bobby, in great delight. "Wouldn't you think that was Lil Pendleton?"

Jess stared at the bill, and whispered: "I would indeed."

"'But of course it isn't!" gasped Bobby, looking at Jess, in sudden curiosity.

"What is Lil's middle name?" demanded Jess, suddenly.

"Why—I—— Ah! she *has* got a middle

name, hasn't she? She signs it 'Lillian G. Pendleton!'"

"That is it," said Jess.

"But of course this can't be Lil?" cried Bobby, aghast. "'The Lady of the Castle' might be another name for 'The Duchess of Doosenberry'; though. What do you think, Jess?"

"I don't know what to think," said Jess. "But you give me that bill, Bobby, and I'll show it to Mother Wit."

CHAPTER XXIII

"CAUGHT ON THE FLY"

THE last few days before the first performance of "The Spring Road" was a whirl of excitement for most of the girls of Central High, and all those belonging to the M. O. R's. or who were to take part in the play. Mr. Sharp, on his own responsibility, announced a general holiday for Friday, with certain lessons to be made up to pay for the deducted time.

"It is my opinion that little work can be expected from either the young ladies or young gentlemen on the momentous day," he said. "Besides, I understand that Miss Gould desires to have a final rehearsal of the play on Friday morning on the stage upstairs. Therefore, mere matters of education may be put aside."

He was quite good natured about it, however, and entirely approved of the attempt of Central High pupils to do something upon the stage that was really "worth while." And Jess Morse's play was indeed far above the average of amateur attempts.

"You girls are invited to a dash on the *Blue Streak* after the rehearsal to-morrow, Sis," Chet Belding said to Laura at dinner Thursday evening. "Lance and I will show you some sport."

Mrs. Belding looked doubtfully at her husband. "Do you think that ice-boat Chet has built is really safe for the girls, James?" she asked.

"Bless your heart, Mother!" returned the jeweler, his eyes twinkling, "it's quite as safe for Laura and Jess as it is for the boys."

"Ye—es, I suppose so," admitted the good woman. "But it doesn't *seem* so safe. Girls are different from boys."

"Not so different, nowadays," grumbled Chet. "You ought to see some of those husky Central High girls going off with Mrs. Case on their skis. And ski running is as dangerous as ice-boating—believe me!"

"I *do* believe you, my son. I have no reason to doubt your word," returned Mother Belding, quietly.

"Oh, Mum! that's only an expression——"

"Please stick to English—and facts, Chetwood," advised his mother.

"I declare!" grumpily remarked her son. "A meal of victuals at this house has got to be just like attending one of Old Dimple's lectures."

"Chet!" spoke his father, sternly.

"Well! I guess I didn't mean it just that way—not the way it sounded," the boy said hastily. "But mother *does* pick a fellow up so——"

"I have been doing that all your life, my son," said his mother. "Whenever you stub your toe, mother has been their to comfort you."

"Got you there, Chet," laughed Laura. "And you used to be a terrible 'stumble heels,' too."

"Say! you're all down on me," declared her brother, but in a milder tone. "I reckon I'm not so popular in this house as I thought I was. But that isn't the answer to my question, Laura. Do you and Jess want to fly with us to-morrow just after lunch?"

"Of course we do," replied his sister. "I don't suppose mother has any real objection?"

"My objections to your sports and athletics seem to have very little reality about them, children," said Mrs. Belding. "Even my husband will not give me backing."

"When I see Chet and Laura anemic, or otherwise sickly, as the result of their out-of-door sports or gym. work, you will find me up in arms with you against such activities, Mother,"

declared Mr. Belding, jovially. "I'd a good deal rather have little Mother Wit here half a Tom-boy——"

"Which I'm not, I hope, Papa Belding!" cried Laura, quickly.

"I should hope not," said her mother.

"All right," laughed Mr. Belding. "But I would rather you were than like a few of the girls who attend your school. Some of them are growing up to womanhood too quickly to suit me. There's that Pendleton girl——"

"What do you know about Lily Pendleton, Father?" asked Laura, quickly.

"Why, she dresses like a girl of twenty-five —and acts that grown up, too," observed the jeweler. "She was in the store a week or so ago. Now! there's another bad thing. Her mother lets her do just about as she pleases, I guess."

"Mrs. Pendleton has always been very lenient with Lillian," agreed his wife.

"The girl brought into my store a jewel box in which were things valued at more than a thousand dollars, I believe. Old-fashioned jewels left her by her grandmother. She thought of having some re-set. And she really wanted me to buy some of them. She said her mother wouldn't care what she did with them."

"Of course, James, you did not give the girl money?" exclaimed Mrs. Belding.

"Of course I did not! I am not a pawnbroker. But I valued the stones for her, and she took them away. I wonder what she really meant by trying to sell them?"

Laura listened and flushed; but she remained silent. Since her visit to the Plornish tenement, and since she had read the playbill from Keyport that Jess had brought her, Laura had been very gravely exercised in her mind regarding Lily Pendleton. But she could not bring herself to the point of taking either her father or mother into her confidence. It was not her own secret; it was Lily's.

The following morning the rehearsal of "The Spring Road" went with a snap and vim that delighted everybody. Miss Gould could not praise the girls and boys too highly. Even Mr. Pizotti signified his satisfaction with the way in which the play proceeded. Really, the actual production of the piece would go on well without his presence, although the sum they had agreed to pay the stage manager covered the three performances of the play already arranged for.

Laura and Jess went down to the lake after luncheon to meet the two boys. The *Blue*

Streak, fresh in a new coat of paint, and with every part of the mechanism guaranteed in perfect order, was already hauled out upon the ice.

The surface of the lake was not as it had been when the girls had taken their first ride on the aero-iceboat. Then the ice was like glass; but now it was pebbly, broken in spots, and not a little "hummocky." There was a stiff wind blowing, too, and this broke up the thinner ice around the water-holes. The course for sleighs and for ice-boats was fairly safe, however, all the way to Keyport.

"Say! we just saw Lily going driving with that sleek little foreigner," said Lance, as the two girls appeared. "I should think Mrs. Pendleton would send a chaperone with her daughter. Old Mike, the coachman, is right under the girl's thumb."

"What do you mean, Lance?" asked Laura, quickly.

"Why, Lil Pendleton and the stage manager are out there in the Pendletons' sleigh. They're aiming for Keyport. And Lil has a big box in the sleigh. Guess they are taking lunch along."

"Lunch!" ejaculated Chet. "Why, that yellow box would hold enough for an army."

"My goodness me! A yellow box?" cried Jess. "Was it that box in which Lil has been

bringing her costumes to and from the rehearsals?"

"Dunno," said Chet, not much interested.

But Jess turned to her chum, eagerly.

"You know, Laura, she insisted in packing the dresses all into that box again this noon and taking them home with her as usual, although every other girl left her costume in the dressing-rooms. Did you notice it?"

"No," said Laura, slowly.

"Maybe she doesn't expect to get back until it's time to go on for the evening performance," suggested Lance.

"That's not it," returned Laura, quietly.

"What do you suppose that girl has got in her mind, Laura?" demanded Jess, as the boys were making the final preparations for their start.

"I do not know. But I believe she is the 'talented young amateur' advertised to appear at the Keyport Orpheum to-night," said Laura, gravely.

"You don't mean it!" gasped Jess. Then she added, with sudden excitement:

"Why, she'll spoil my play!"

"If she is not here to play her part she will certainly interfere sadly with the success of 'The Spring Road,'" admitted Laura.

"Oh, oh! That mean, mean thing!" cried Jess, under her breath.

"She is taking her costumes to wear in the production of her own play, which she has renamed 'The Lady of the Castle,'" said Laura. "She will make a lovely 'Duchess of Doosenberry,' as Bobby nicknamed it, in those robes, Jess."

"Why, Laura, I believe you are not sympathetic," cried Jess.

"Don't you be afraid, dear. Miss Lily will not appear as 'the talented yong amateur, Greba Pendennis,' if that is what she really intends to attempt. I have fixed that."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jess. But just then the boys shouted to them and they had to hurry to take their places in the ice-boat.

"Chet," said Laura, to her brother, as she settled herself aboard, "run down near the Pendleton sleigh if you can. I want to speak to Lil."

"Just as you say, Sis," returned her brother. "All ready? Let her go, Lance! We'll show these girls some traveling, eh?"

The *Blue Streak* was off in a moment and the way she tore over the ice always gave the two girls, at first, a feeling as though a wreck were imminent. But in a minute or two the feeling

subsided, and through the automobile goggles they both wore they dared look ahead.

On this cold afternoon there were not many sleighs or ice-boats on the racing course between Centerport and Keyport. But suddenly Lance looked around, grinned through his mask, and waved his hand toward the shore. The girls immediately knew that he had sighted the Pendleton sleigh.

Laura turned to look at her brother, and he nodded at her reassuringly. Lance reduced the speed, and the *Blue Streak* began to move shoreward.

The girls could now see the sleigh plainly. The yellow box in which Lil carried her costumes was a splotch of color against the white fur robes. And there was Lil herself and the black figure of the little stage director.

The *Blue Streak* ran closer and of a sudden the young folks aboard the ice-boat saw that something was amiss with the Pendletons' horses. The dapple grays were fat, well fed beasts, and the coachman was old and rheumatic. Perhaps the appearance of another ice-boat that had just passed the sleigh had startled the horses.

However that might be, old Mike was suddenly flung from his seat, and the horses charged down the lake at a gallop, swinging the sleigh

behind them at a pace that threatened to overturn it at any moment!

The four friends on the aero-iceboat could hear Lil scream. And up sprang the little black figure of Pizotti, alias Plornish, and the next moment he had leaped to the ice!

The horses tore on, and Lil was really in peril. But Chet guided the *Blue Streak* right down to the runaway, coming so close that Lance Darby was able to leap into the driver's seat from the running ice-boat.

It was a feat that called for agility and coolness; but the boy did it bravely. The next moment he was out on the tongue, had recovered the trailing lines, and the dapple grays were soon brought to an abrupt stop.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GREAT NIGHT

THE event had certainly come to a startling climax. Even Lily herself, writing a dozen "Duchess of Dawnleighs," could not have imagined quite so serious a situation to balk the determination of her created heroines, as here had arrived to balk herself!

"Well, Lil," Laura said to her, as the girl got out of the sleigh. "I guess you won't run away to-day and leave us all in a fix—and spoil Jess's play. What do you think?"

"Oh, Laura! is poor Mike hurt?" cried the girl, and from that moment Lara thought better of her. For Lil showed she was not entirely heartless. She had thought first of the old coachman who had served her family for so many years, and who was even then probably helping her to get to Keyport and the expected performance of "The Duchess of Dawnleigh," against his own good sense.

"Here he comes, limping," said Laura, rather

bruskly. "He's not dead. But how about Plornish?"

"Plornish?" returned Lil, puzzled.

"Pizotti, then, if you prefer his stage name."

"Is—isn't Pizotti his name?" demanded Lil, still struggling with her tears.

"His real name is Abel Plornish," said Laura, bluntly. She saw no use in "letting Lily down easy." "He has a wife and seven children living down on Governor Street, in a miserable tenement. He neglects them a good deal, I believe. But this time, if he had made what he expected to out of you—— By the way, Lil, what were you going to pay him?"

"I—I—— For putting me on the stage with his company?" she stammered.

"Is that the way he put it? Well, yes," said Laura. "It's the same thing. He was going to star you in your own play, was he?"

"Ye—es," sobbed Lily. "And now it's all spoiled! And I was going to take all the money I pawned grandmother's jewels for——"

"Goodness me! How much?" snapped Laura.

"Five hundred dollars."

"Has he got the cash?"

"No," sobbed Lil.

"All right, then. No harm done. I went to

Mr. Monterey and he found out that Plornish had got together no company at all. You were the only person who had learned a part in your play, I guess, Lily. Ah! Chet's got him."

Indeed, Chet had stopped the aero-iceboat and run back to the prostrate stage director. Plornish had a broken leg and had to be lifted by both boys into the Pendleton sleigh. Old Michael could manage the horses again and turned them about. Laura elected to go back to Centerport with the injured man and the very-much-disturbed Lily Pendleton.

"Now, just see the sort of a man this fellow is," said Laura, paying no attention to the groanings of Plornish. "He was intending to get the money from you at Keyport and then disappear. All he spent was merely for the bills put up advertising the show—the show which he never intended would come off, Lil! And you were going down there and leaving us all in the lurch!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" groaned Lil.

"I hope so. Sorry enough to go home and rest and prepare to play your part in 'The Spring Road' to-night," spoke Laura, tartly.

"Oh, dear me! how can I?" cried the girl.

"If you don't," said Laura, frankly, "I won't keep this affair a secret. You will be the laugh-

ing stock of all Central High. I am not going to allow Jess Morse's play to be spoiled because of *you*. If you were so jealous and envious that you did not want to see Jess's play succeed, you could have refused, at least, to be cast for an important part in it. And now," went on Mother Wit, firmly, "you are going to play that part."

"Oh, Laura! you are so harsh," sobbed Lily.

"Much that will hurt you!" sniffed Laura. "We'll drive around by the hospital and leave this Plornish man. If he dares to open his mouth, we'll have him punished for trying to swindle you," and Laura looked sternly at the black-eyed, foreign-looking fellow.

"You see, we know all about you, Mr. Plornish, and you will have to abide by what is done for you. Some of us will help your family while you are helpless. But you've got to be good, or even Mr. Vandergriff will forget that you and he used to be boys together. Pah! with your hair dye, and paint and powder, and all! Why, you are nearly fifty years old, so Mr. Vandergriff says, and you act and dress like a silly boy."

Lily listened to all this, and stopped sobbing. She began to see that there was a chance for her to escape being a butt for her school-fellows' jokes.

"Can—can you keep Jess and the boys from talking?" she whispered to Laura.

"They'll be like oysters if I tell them to," declared Mother Wit.

"Oh, then, I'll do my best," agreed the foolish girl. Possibly she was deeply impressed by her escape.

Mother Wit's plans were carried out to the letter. Plornish was deposited at the hospital, where he would remain for some weeks. The performance of Jess's play would have to get along without him on this opening night.

And when the hour for the performance arrived, Lily Pendleton was ready, her tears wiped away, glorious in one of her costumes, and "preening like a peacock"—to quote Bobby Hargrew—before one of the long mirrors in the dressing room.

"My, my!" laughed Bobby. "You look as grand as the Duchess of Doosenberry, don't you, Lil?"

Lily looked at her rather sharply. "I'd really like to know how much that child knows?" the older girl murmured.

But it wasn't what the shrewd Bobby *knew;* it was what she *suspected!*

CHAPTER XXV

GOOD NEWS FOR JESS

BEHIND the scenes just before the curtain rose upon the first act of "The Spring Road" there was such a bustle, and running about, and whispering, and excited signals and fragmentary talk, that it did look, Jess said, as though matters never would be straightened out.

Did this one know his or her part perfectly? Was this dress right? Oh, dear! how can this one be made to look right "from the front?" And a thousand other doubts and queries.

No matter how many times a play is rehearsed, it does seem just before the opening performance as though a dozen things would happen to spoil the effect of the first appearance. And to the author of the play it seems as though every person in that audience is a carping critic!

Jess peered through the peephole in the curtain and saw that the hall was crowded.

"I just know it will be a failure!" she moaned to her chum, Laura Belding. "It will be laughed at. I feel it!"

"Strange how I should feel so differently!" spoke Laura, cheerfully.

"Oh, dear! I'll never be able to hold up my head again if it's not liked," Jess pursued. "It will just *kill* me."

"Don't die so easy, Chum," said Laura. "You know we'll need you in the big inter-school meet after Easter."

"Oh! I'll never be fit to do anything in athletics again!" gasped Jess.

Which was certainly not borne out by the facts, for Jess Morse took a most important part in the spring meet of the Girls' Branch Athletic League, as a perusal of the next volume of this series: "The Girls of Central High on Track and Field; Or, The Champions of the School League," will prove.

At last Miss Gould said all was ready. Really, she did very well without the assistance of the unpleasant, black-eyed, little Pizotti! The signal was given and the curtain rose on the first tableau—and it *was* a pretty sight! In this allegorical introduction to Jess's play there were a score of the very prettiest girls of Central High, and they had been dressed and were grouped so artistically that an "Ah!" of admiration burst from the big audience.

The little fantasy unwound the thread of plot

which introduced the real play; but when the curtain went down there was no enthusiastic applause. The audience was expectant; but did not wholly understand it. And this was as it should be; the intent of that little prologue was merely to whet the appetite for the real play.

"The Spring Road" ran its three acts through with unvarying success. The applause grew more pronounced; the interest of the audience grew deeper. The fact that a young girl had written the text of the play became harder and harder to believe as the evening lengthened.

At the end—when the general lights went out, one by one upon the stage and left the two principal characters in the radiance of the spot light alone—and when this dimmed slowly and finally went out, the silence of the audience was momentous.

Jess, in the wings, clinging to her chum, waited, scarcely breathing, for the verdict. Had it failed? Had the little lesson she had tried to teach, and the pretty story she had told, failed to "get over?"

Suddenly there was a roar of delight from the back of the hall. Some of the older boys of Central High had managed to get tickets to this first performance, and, led by big Griff, they be-

gan to chant the well-known yell of Central High.

But *that* was not what Jess waited for. That was school loyalty. She had expected that.

As the thunder of the boys' applause began to wane there was another sound which reached the ears of those listening behind the curtain. A steady, sharp clapping of hands; then joined by a shuffling of feet. The great mass of the audience was applauding.

The curtain went up, and the whole company appeared. It rose and rose again, at last to display only the principals, down to the final two who had closed the play. But that was not enough.

They could hear Dr. Agnew's heavy voice growling somewhere out in the darkness of the auditorium:

"Author! Author! Bring her out!"

The boys took up the demand. They even called on Jess Morse by name, and hitched that name to the battle cry of their athletic field.

"You've got to go!" cried Laura, giving her chum a push. "You've got to, Jess!"

And so Jess Morse stepped forward, modestly, bashfully, and faced the great audience. Tears half blinded her, but she bowed as she had been taught. And all the time she tasted the first intoxicating draught of Fame!

But that was not quite the end of it all. Mr. Monterey, of the Centerport Opera House, was in a seat down in front that evening. He never was seen to applaud once; but on Saturday evening, when the play was repeated for the general public to attend, he came again and this time brought a stranger who paid quite as close attention to Jess's play as did Mr. Monterey himself.

After the performance and before Jess and Laura started for home with their escorts, they heard that the stranger with the local manager was a very famous New York producer. He had come especially to see "The Spring Road."

And when Jess arrived home she found the gentleman, with Mr. Monterey, conferring with her mother in their little sitting room.

"I assure you," said Mrs. Morse, proudly, "the play is practically Josephine's own work. It is her idea, clothed in her own language. I am pleased that you find it so admirable for a child to have written——"

"It is admirable—in spots—for anybody to have written," said the New York gentleman. "And this is the young lady?"

Mrs. Morse introduced Jess.

"You are the budding playwright?" suggested the stranger.

"I am not so sure of that," replied Jess,

troubled a little. "I wanted the prize Mrs. Kerrick offered, and I did my best."

"And your best is very good—remarkably good," declared the producer. "I have come to see you and your mother about it. I want you to let me have the right to produce the play. Monday I will come with a contract; meanwhile I want Mrs. Morse to accept this check—which Mr. Monterey will endorse for me—to bind the agreement. I take a sort of option on the play, as it were," he said, and he handed the check to Jess.

"You do not mean it?" gasped the girl.

"I certainly do," said the other, rising. "Your play is not like the work of a professional playwright; but a professional writer of plays can take your work and whip it into shape—— And I am willing to show my confidence in its final success by risking that sum upon it to start with."

Jess looked then at the check. It was another two hundred dollars. Jess shut her eyes tight for a moment; then she opened them again to be sure she was not dreaming.

When she opened them she really believed she saw Poverty fly out of the window!

THE END

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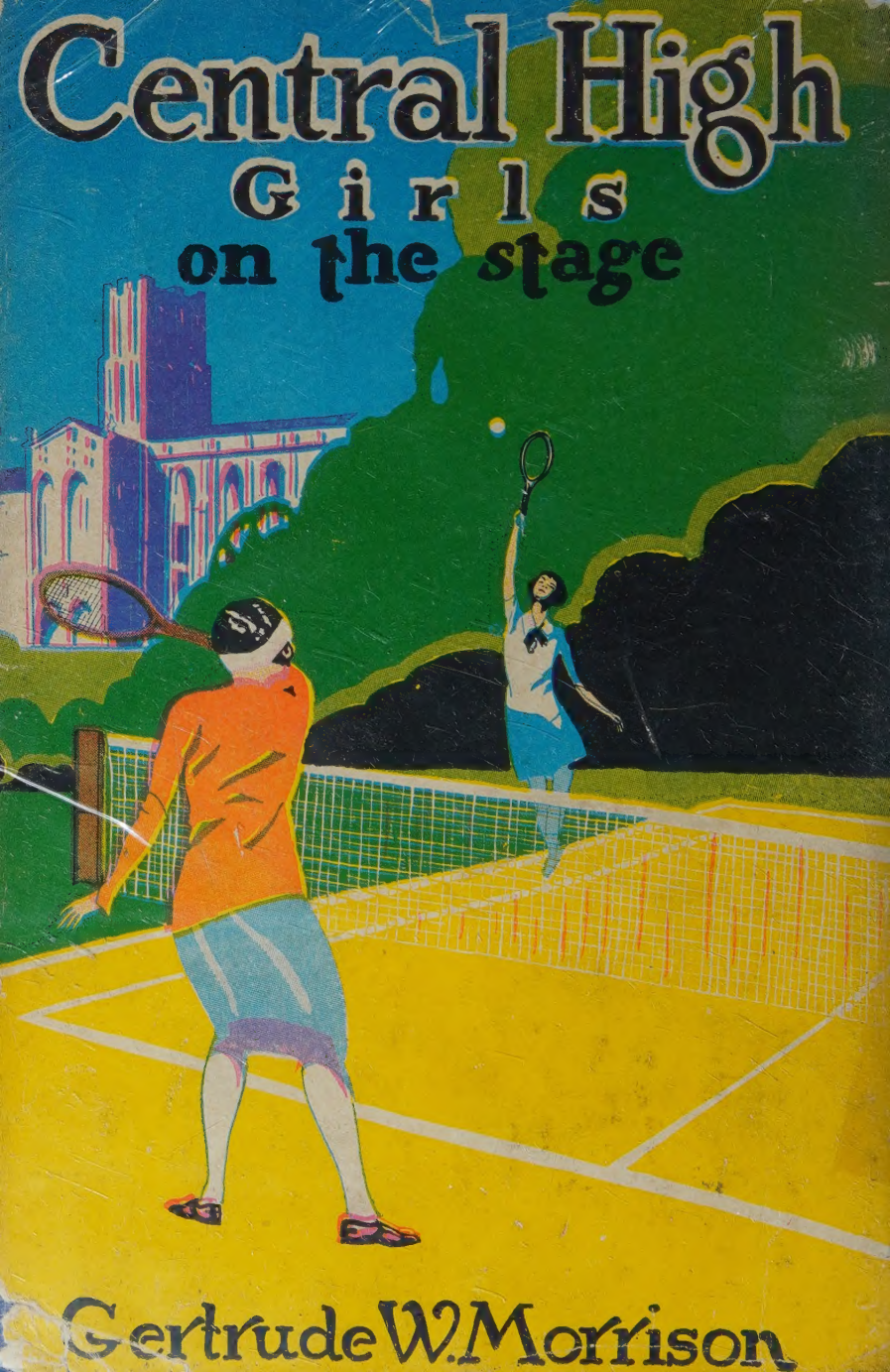

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